

By the Grace of the Gods

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Roy

Illust. Ririnra





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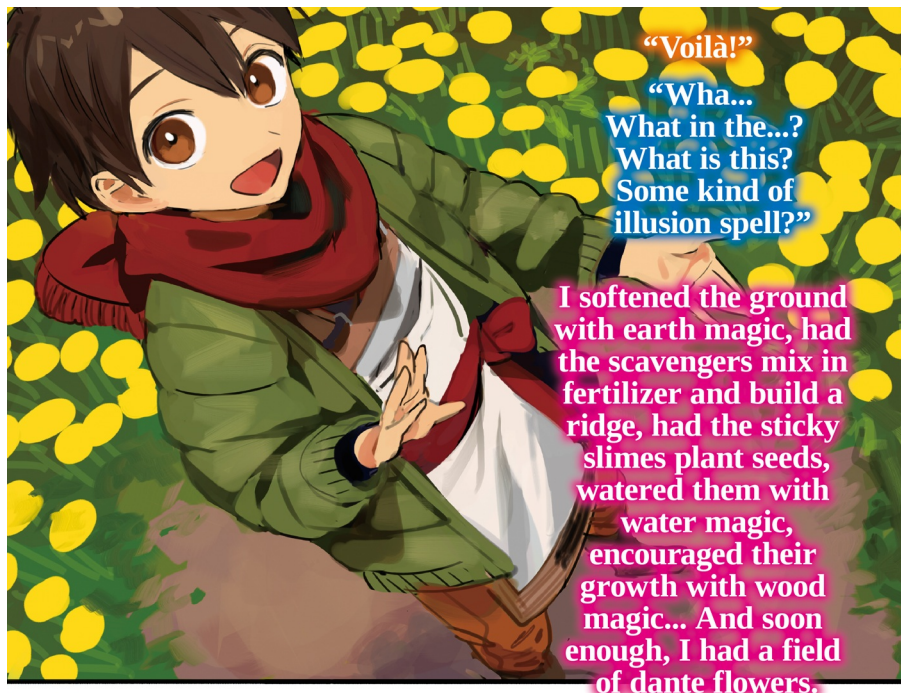
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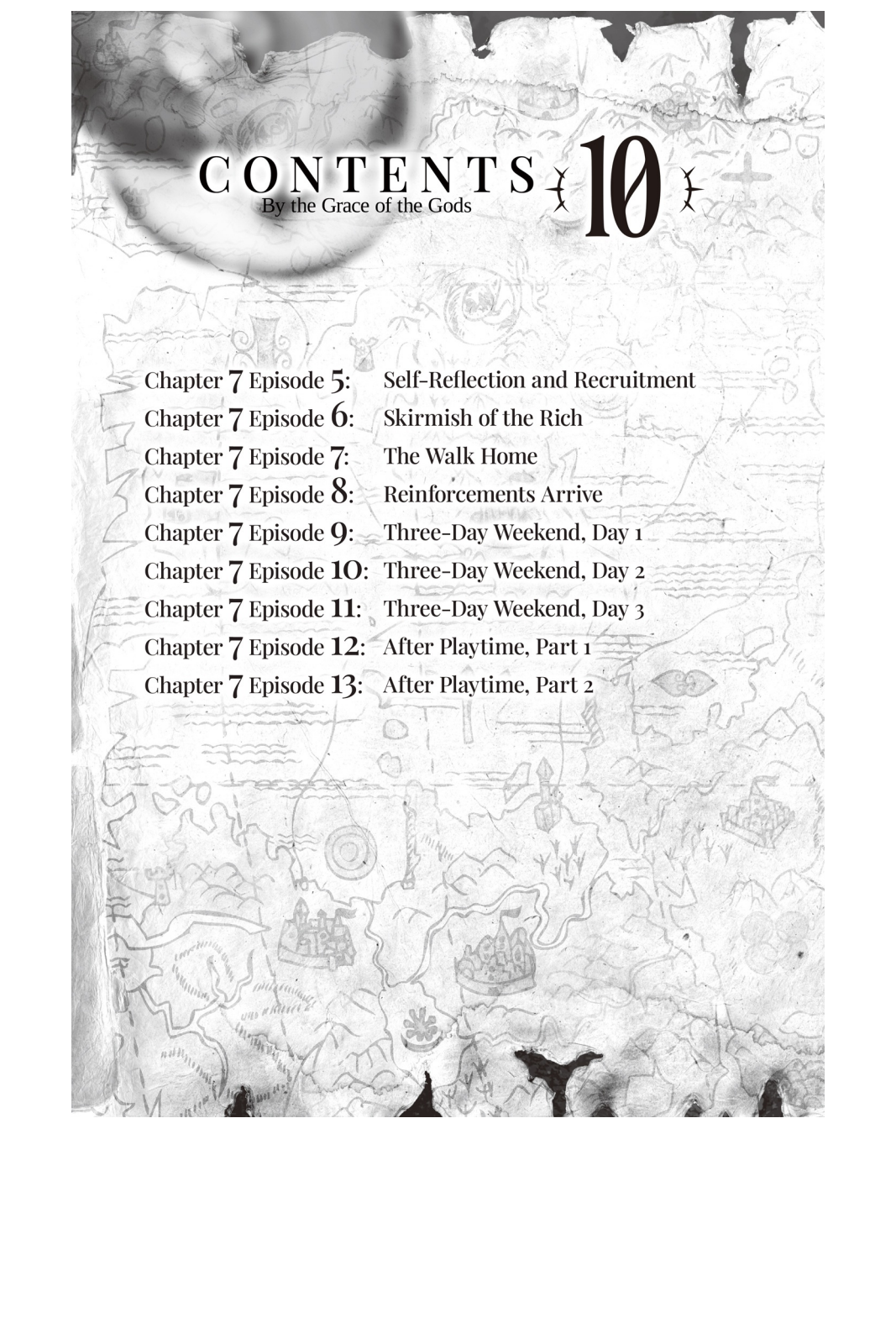
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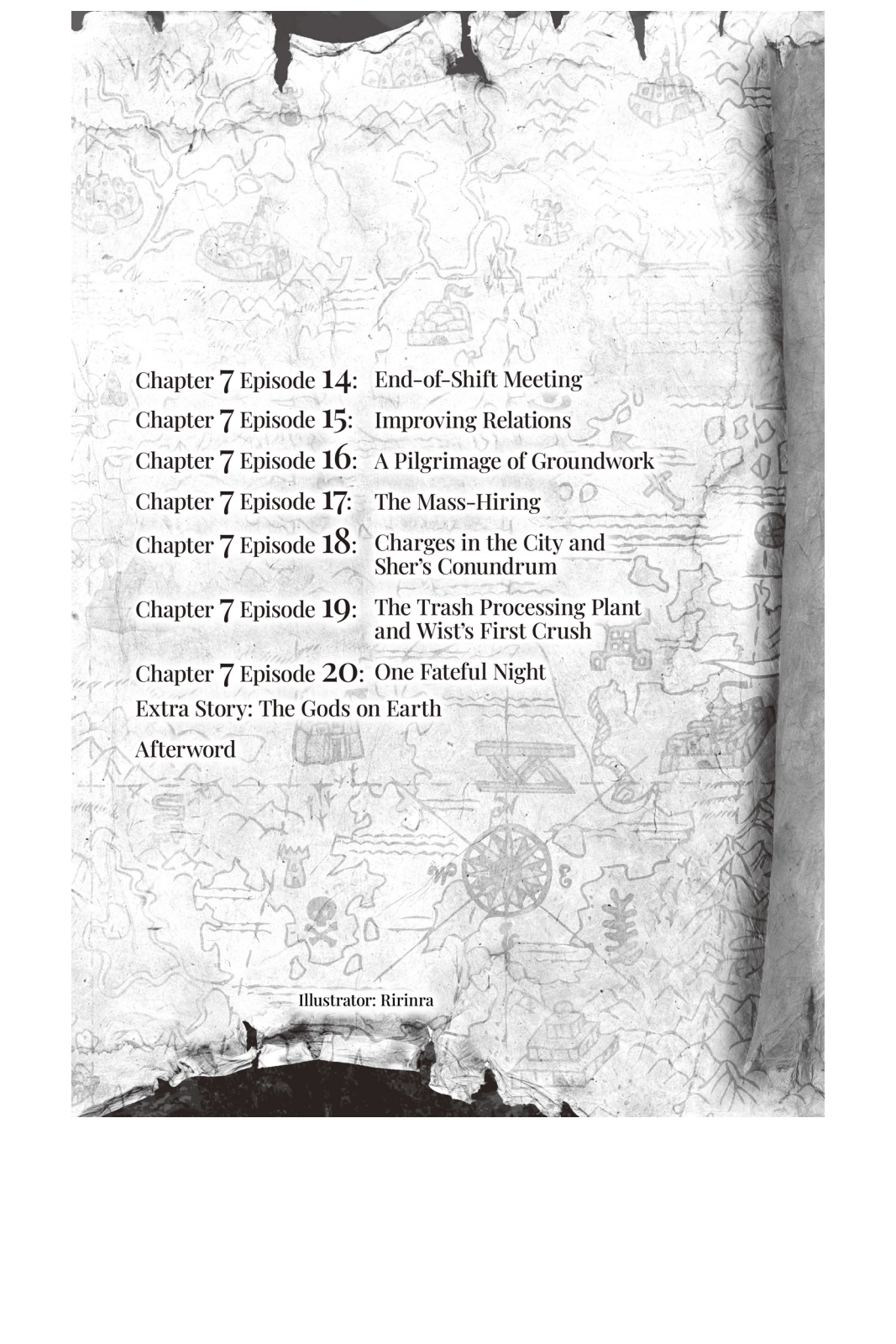


CONTENTS

By the Grace of the Gods

10

- Chapter 7 Episode 5: Self-Reflection and Recruitment
- Chapter 7 Episode 6: Skirmish of the Rich
- Chapter 7 Episode 7: The Walk Home
- Chapter 7 Episode 8: Reinforcements Arrive
- Chapter 7 Episode 9: Three-Day Weekend, Day 1
- Chapter 7 Episode 10: Three-Day Weekend, Day 2
- Chapter 7 Episode 11: Three-Day Weekend, Day 3
- Chapter 7 Episode 12: After Playtime, Part 1
- Chapter 7 Episode 13: After Playtime, Part 2



Chapter 7 Episode 14: End-of-Shift Meeting

Chapter 7 Episode 15: Improving Relations

Chapter 7 Episode 16: A Pilgrimage of Groundwork

Chapter 7 Episode 17: The Mass-Hiring

Chapter 7 Episode 18: Charges in the City and Sher's Conundrum

Chapter 7 Episode 19: The Trash Processing Plant and Wist's First Crush

Chapter 7 Episode 20: One Fateful Night

Extra Story: The Gods on Earth

Afterword

Illustrator: Rininra

Chapter 7, Episode 5: Self-Reflection and Recruitment

Four days later, I woke up at my usual time, no alarm necessary. As normal, I made breakfast for my slimes and myself before getting dressed and preparing to leave for work. I always took time to work on a divine statue whenever I had a bit of leeway before work every day as well. Such was my morning routine as of late.

I sighed. The thought occurred that I'd been kinda down ever since that little fiasco in the artisan district. But I was aware of how burned out I'd been that day, so maybe that justified it somewhat?

Serelipta's words from before rang in my ears.

Life's about to get really hectic for you, so be ready.

He must have been hinting at the state of things in Gimul once I returned from Fatoma, since "hectic" was certainly one way of describing the current situation, what with all the rampant crime going on. Given his (technical) status as a god, it wasn't hard to imagine that he was aware of what was going down in Gimul when we spoke. It would've been nice if he'd been more forthcoming with me, but then again, I figured he wasn't the type to give anyone information like that out of the milk of human—or godly—kindness. He was at least generous enough to give a mere mortal like myself a word of warning, though.

After the incident, I'd gotten all introspective and asked myself why that whole situation had affected me the way it did. By now, I'd drawn a vague connection between the current state of Gimul and my previous life as an office schmuck. Though the scenery and air were different, I couldn't help but think that my "old" life was lurking around the corner. I felt like I'd been shaken awake from a lovely dream, as though this feeling was a sign that all my good fortune in this world up to now was about to be nullified by equally great misfortune. Cloudy, inexplicable feelings of dread weighed on my soul.

Well, not that I don't trust my employees, it's just... I want to protect those who've been kind and helpful to me. No matter how remote the odds of it happening are, the thought of losing them terrifies me. I just hope it's only paranoia on my part... These thoughts are practically just another part of my morning routine at this point.

"Time to go, I suppose..." I sighed, and dragged myself out of my

abode, heading in the direction of my shop.



When I got there, something was waiting for me—something which definitely wasn't going to do my sour mood any favors.

"A letter?"

"From the laundry shop."

"*The* laundry shop?"

Apparently, my displeasure was written all over my face, because Carme gave me an apologetic look. I made a mental reminder to watch myself with that, then took the letter and read it over.

"Hm...I see."

"Sir, would you mind if I read it myself?"

"Go ahead. It's basically a letter of apology, for what it's worth."

Indeed, the first paragraph was a profuse apology. The letter then went on to explain that she was a mother and a shopkeeper, and she had to balance both of those roles. Then, she clarified who the men outside her shop were, and explained their actions.

"So, does this change anything?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned... She didn't ask for another meeting or anything. I'll tell her we accept the apology, and then we'll just focus on the tasks at hand."

"Huh..."

"What's the 'huh' about?"

"I'm not disagreeing with your decision; I just expected you'd try to talk to her again and smooth things over. Not to mention, this is the second time I've seen you react in a way that's totally unlike you."

"Well... I don't normally hold grudges, and I'm certainly not holding any now, but... I still don't think I can trust her with a branch. Your concern is appreciated, though." I was quite aware of how worried Carme was about my mental state.

"Any other mail?"

"Right here. Letter from Master Glissela of the Merchant's Guild, and the usual stuff from Master Taylor of the Tamer's Guild... And here's one with no sender. I think it was that adventurer kid, Beck, who brought it."

"Must be from the slum leader, Libble, then. Let's see... Oh, wonderful."

"Looks like you've received some good news."

"Yes. We've been discussing a few things, and it seems like they're all moving in the right direction. Do you remember the garbage plant and the slime product factory we discussed the other day? Building the plants, not to mention all the other facilities associated with the process, would require a lot of land, so we agreed that the best

solution was to level a portion of the slums.”

“What about the people who live there?”

A good question. One which the letter had an answer to.

“Seems like they looked into it and found out that most residences in the slums are flat, one-story buildings; it’s basically a congregation of shacks.” Many of them seemed on the brink of collapse as well—they were afflicted with everything from large cracks in the wall to rotten lumber that no amount of patching up could fix.

“So if we could rebuild those shacks as two-story houses, that’s double the people we can fit in the same amount of space. Makes things more three-dimensional.”

“I suppose that checks out...”

“It took me a week to build this shop using magic and slimes. I presented that example and had them survey the slums for anyone willing to have their residence converted to a two-story building. After they’re built, the owner would take residence, of course, on whichever floor they chose. I then had them ask if they would be willing to rent out their empty floor to someone if their home was converted. The owners would get a remodeling, and additional income from rental too. I wasn’t totally on board at first, but the guildmasters said that it could be an option if these owners and renters were offered certain guarantees. I took the idea to Lible, and he told me that the people in the slums were more receptive to the idea than I thought.”

Looking at the documents, I was surprised to see some enthusiastic volunteers. Comments like, “I don’t have much to lose anyway,” or “I can move whenever,” or asking when we’d get started; that sort of thing. I would have to insist on airtight agreements between both parties. It wouldn’t bode well for either side if I gave them the impression that I was illegally chasing people away from their land. Having already been mistaken for one of those scammers, I wasn’t eager to relive the experience.

“So we would have the residents move out, then buy out the land from the owners, making space for the project through mutual agreement. Arnold, a big shot in the local government, had mentioned that he wanted to rezone the slums if possible...”

At this point, I was contemplating suggesting the building of a high-density residential area. I had already planned to build dorms for the factory and garbage plant anyway, and I could demolish a lot of buildings at once with my magic and slimes. Clearing rubble from there was easy enough, so I could hire people to expedite it... Was I already getting myself into zoning projects?

I imagined the rows of slime-related factories standing in the former slums. *Turning Skid Row into Slime Row... A sound idea, I dare say.*

Eventually, I finished explaining everything to Carme.

“You lost me towards the end, but I’m glad to see things are going smoothly. As long as you’re enjoying yourself.”

While I still had some concerns and hurdles I would have to clear, I got a good first impression, which was encouraging.

“Just don’t burn yourself out. That’s my only concern,” Carme said with a smile before returning to his work.

Once he’d left, I went through the remaining letters and began composing replies. Whenever I reached this step in the process, I couldn’t help but be reminded of how convenient emails were. Meeting people face to face would have been the quickest option to get things done, but all of my contacts seemed too busy to arrange anything. Ergo, it made sense to exchange letters that could be read at the individual’s convenience. Of course, then email came along, and with it, the ability to share such information instantaneously. It had been quite a while since I’d pined for a modern convenience like this...



The work day flew by. The sun was setting, and it was about time for us to close up shop.

“For you, sir!” Maria called from the front door.

“Let them in!”

Today I was visited by Pauline, the florist next door, Sieg, the butcher next door to her, their daughter Renny, and Rick, who was just a ball of energy.

“Hello, Ryoma...”

“Are you all right, Sieg? You seem like you’ve lost weight... And you look exhausted.”

“Heh... I’ve been busy lately, but it’s gotten better. The colder it gets, the less game there is for hunters... Pauline’s been helping me too.”

“Are the winters tough on flower shops as well?”

“Well, there are flowers that bloom in winter, not to mention ones I could force to bloom with magic. Those are more high-end property, though. So I barely get any customers... Thank you, Ryoma, for looking after them.”

“I’ll be joining you, so they’ll be safe with my employee.” I turned towards Maria, who had shown them in.

“It’s no trouble at all. We always babysat the younger ones in the village.”

“You’re a lifesaver, really. It wouldn’t have come to this if one of us could have taken care of it.”

“They said they required one representative per shop, so...”

Three days earlier, the day after my outing to the other side of the

city, a letter had arrived courtesy of the Merchant's Guild.

"The letter I got said that more shops are suffering attacks as crime increases in Gimul, and called for shop owners to gather and share information and solutions... It was signed 'Gimul Union of Small Businesses.' Is this a brand new organization?"

"That'd be my guess. We've never heard of it."

"It's true that crime has gone up... Maybe someone felt threatened enough to take action."

It wasn't rare for shop owners to congregate. Of course, there were certain qualifications the owners had to meet in order to attend, but seeing how we received the invitation, we could safely assume that we'd qualified.

I was a bit skeptical about the meeting after asking about the union at the guild and learning that they had no records of activity. It was a definite possibility that the current state of the city had someone feeling significantly endangered. Even the representative at the guild had said as much when I asked about them. Maybe I was just paranoid about this new organization...



I'd almost convinced myself of that until the moment I set foot into the large conference room of the Merchant's Guild, populated by fifty or so decently dressed shop owners.

I shouldn't be here.

It was instinctive. I was curious about the meeting and even hopeful for the opportunity of working together with local shopkeepers. But at this very moment, I seriously wanted to turn on my heels and walk out. The urge to do so rose with each passing second, when—

"Hello, Ryoma. Fancy seeing you here."

"Huh? Oh, Darson!" Darson Digger, the owner of Digger's Armory, a shop I frequented for my adventuring, had spotted me. "You decided to come too?"

"My place's doing pretty good with everything going on. And..."

"Oh, this is Carme, my assistant manager. And these are Sieg and Pauline, the shopkeepers who operate next door to me." In turn, I introduced Darson to the three of them.

There were business acquaintances of Darson's, Sieg's, or Pauline's among those who overheard our introduction, and their introductions were overheard by more acquaintances...

"Pleasure to meet you. I've heard a lot about your shop."

"I've always wanted to meet you! You run quite an impressive shop, especially for someone your age."

"I've heard you have connections with the duke."

“Wish I had your luck...”

“Shake his hand. Maybe that luck of his will rub off on you.”

Before I knew it, I was surrounded by a crowd of admiring shopkeepers. While I was working my way through them, a man entered the room.

“Thank you for your patience,” he announced. “We’re on time, so let’s get the conference started.”

Chapter 7, Episode 6: Skirmish of the Rich

At the front of the grand conference room stood a podium and a blackboard, with rows of desks and chairs before them to accommodate the crowd, like for students in a classroom.

Once all the attendees were seated, the man who had formally commenced the meeting took his place behind the podium. “Thank you for sharing your precious time with us today. My name is Wanz, and I am the organizer of this conference. I am not as experienced as most of you, but I’ll try to conduct a productive meeting.”

Applause rang out from the crowd.

“Thank you. Let me begin with this question—how do you feel about the safety of our city?” With that question, he began his speech emphasizing how desperately the city required our coordinated action.

The speech was met with occasional moments of resistance.

“The city guards know what they’re doing. I’ve heard they’ve increased their numbers and reinforced patrols.”

“I have heard the same, and I do not dispute the competency of our city guards. But let me be clear! Those measures were taken by the guards because their numbers were insufficient to prevent the crimes now ravaging our streets!”

“Well...”

“The increase in patrolling guards is a desperate measure to counteract the rise in crime. As a result, there are more and more cases where perpetrators get away or take down guards because the new recruits are not trained adequately. They are trying their best, I’m sure. But their best efforts cannot erase the fact that more and more of the guards tasked with protecting our city are becoming victims. Can *you* be so sure that we will all be safe in their hands? Can you put your full trust in the guards as they are today?”

“B-But—”

“But, nothing! When the unthinkable happens, when the trust in them is betrayed, it could be you or your loved ones who suffer the consequences.”

Any criticism or opposition was quickly silenced by Wanz, in a manner which left the attendees quite intimidated.

I had a similar thought process of considering the worst-case scenario; maybe that helped me feel a strong sense of revulsion to

Wanz, despite following his logic. When I tried to dissect that feeling, I found a critical difference between Wanz and myself. While I couldn't help but think about the worst-case scenario and always prepared my best for it, I never felt the need to push my fear onto others. On the other hand, Wanz, under the pretense of an impassioned plea for us to recognize the situation and prepare accordingly, seemed to be fanning fear in the attendees by painting vivid portraits of the slippery slope that could come of not listening to him.

"Just this year, I was finally approved by my mentor to open my own shop—a young bird fresh out of his nest, now in the unfamiliar city of Gimul. Unfortunately, I am not a man with the necessary trust to just sit back and put my own life in the hands of the city guards. My business took a lot of work to open, and the changes in our city have given me many sleepless nights; no doubt they have done the same for you as well."

"He does have a point; crime is definitely a problem."

"I agree that we can't just sit on our hands and do nothing."

Throughout his speech, Wanz made sure to paint himself as "one of us," while expressing concern for the city. Every time a sympathetic comment came from the crowd, more and more people seemed to buy into Wanz's speech.

The way he played on the fear of the attendees brought to mind the tactics used by con men. I was beginning to recognize the air in the conference room. This gathering was a mere formality, being used to repackage something that had already been rendered a fait accompli by committee. Despite this ostensibly being a conference, there was no opportunity to share new ideas or have any actual discussion. Anyone who dared question Wanz was silenced or ridiculed. They may as well have just sent us all a letter instead.

Laying down the groundwork was important for any endeavor, but this conference was following a script. There was no doubt in my mind that the first few people who jumped to agree with or defend Wanz were doing so on his pay. Wanz had fed their fears, and he could steer the room in whatever direction they wanted him to. The more I thought about it, the more red flags I could see spring up. The increase in crime was already rumored to have been instigated by a group of nobles. If Wanz and his lackeys were involved in the crime spike, was this conference a trap? What were they going to force us into under the guise of "cooperation?"

"In these challenging times, us local merchants would do well to keep together and get through it all!"

Applause rang out, this time much more enthusiastically than before.

“Carme,” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“Sorry about this.”

“What?”

Leaving Carme confused, I raised my hand. “If I may.”

The eyes of the attendees focused on me, but it took some time for Wanz to spot me in the back row.

“Uh, who is it, back there...? I can’t see your face, I’m afraid.”

“My name is Ryoma Takebayashi. I run a laundry shop called Bamboo Forest on the west side, near the residential area.”

“Thank you! Even I am aware of your reputation as a young, talented business owner. I apologize for not recognizing you sooner.” The friendly smile and apology drew a trickle of sympathetic laughter from the crowd.

“I wouldn’t blame you. After all, I’m a kid surrounded by grown-ups here.”

“I appreciate that. Did you have a question?”

“Yes. I’d like to thank you for holding this conference. I only just opened my shop last spring, so I’ve been listening with great interest. Being a new face in Gimul myself, I don’t have much connection with other shopkeepers here, so I was looking forward to the opportunity to meet those of you with more experience. Naturally, I have my own concerns about the city’s safety, so I was hoping to strengthen bonds within our community and work together to combat the issue.”

That much, at least, was true. I hadn’t met many other shop owners in Gimul, and I wanted to build a good relationship with the community. You could probably chalk that up to me being Japanese in my past life; striving for harmony among people was part of my culture.

“Wonderful! I’m sure you—”

“So I must ask you something! You say that we must keep together to fight back against crime, but how exactly are we meant to do so?”

For a very brief instant, Wanz’s smile faded. If I hadn’t been watching his expression carefully, I likely wouldn’t have noticed at all. Would my normal self have picked up on that? I couldn’t say for sure.

“Of course! A natural question to ask. Excuse me.” Wanz went on with his speech, more so working on the crowd than answering me directly. He was only mixing some ideas that *sounded* like solutions (exchanging information, frequent communication, nighttime patrols, self-defense classes, training seminars for employees, etc.) with comments that exploited the pride and sense of responsibility in the attendees like, “We can no longer rely on the guards!” The four or five plants in the crowd took turns chiming in with approvals.

“Those are my suggestions,” Wanz concluded. “What do you all think?”

“Absolutely bril—”

“Worthless,” I loudly stated, cutting off the man who leapt to agree with Wanz. The conference room froze, and I even felt animosity from some of the attendees.

“Worthless? Whatever do you mean, Ryoma?”

“I mean what I said. Your suggestions will only prove effective in the long term. In the short term, they are next to worthless.”

“Of course, their effects will not be immediate. But nothing ventured, nothing gained!”

“Exactly!”

“What’s the point in giving up before you try?”

“I swear, kids nowadays are just...”

As expected, some of the attendees began attacking me. I had to dig my heels in. “Are all of you really *that* stupid?”

Apparently, the people trying to knock me down weren’t expecting such a blunt insult.

“Sir?!”

“Shut up, Carme.”

Sorry, Carme, but this really isn’t the time. He always was intuitive, and seemed to pick up on times when I flagrantly broke my character. While he didn’t seem to know where I was going with this, he placed his trust in me all the same.

“We are here because we need an *urgent* solution to fight crime.”

“Surely *any* solution is better than nothing!”

“What’s the harm in learning self-defense?”

“Or patrolling the streets?”

I heard a few muttered agreements to my point, but they were promptly drowned out by Wanz’s lapdogs.

“Please, everyone, settle down. I appreciate your enthusiasm, and I’ve heard some good ideas. I do believe patrolling is one of the more immediate solutions that was mentioned, and I don’t see the harm in learning self-defense either.”

“Well, then try *doing* those if you’re so confident about them. But speaking of self-defense, Wanz, did you not mention yourself that newly recruited guards are inadequately trained and more likely to be overpowered by criminals?”

“Well—”

“It’s a good point. Paying guards to keep us safe is moot if they’re not trained well enough to deal with a criminal packing heat. But now you’re telling merchants like us to learn self-defense while we work our shops and deal with those same criminals? Does anyone seriously believe they could protect themselves that way? I sure don’t. Also, you

said that you don't dispute the competence of our guards. I agree wholeheartedly; my stance on night patrols is no different. I do believe potential witnesses can prevent crimes before they happen. But if the patrol comes across someone suspicious or witnesses a crime, they could be attacked immediately. Just as some criminals may plan to kill during their robbery, some of them may become enraged and try to attack any witnesses. Do you really believe all of us could handle a situation like that? Take a look around."

The attendees were a mixed bag of men and women, some of them portly, others skinny, and a number of them clearly in their elder years. They were merchants, not fighters. More than half of them probably didn't even get regular exercise.

"And patrolling at night means poor visibility, with few pedestrians or witnesses outside of the patrol team. Some of you may know that I am also an adventurer. And so, speaking in my capacity as an adventurer...you really have no idea what actual combat is like."

This world was rife with swords and magic, but these merchants never went outside the city. With guards around practically every corner, they seemed detached from any life-or-death situation. I looked from Wanz's yes-men to the rest of the attendees, as if to see whether they truly understood how dangerous these "solutions" really were.

While most of them shrunk away from my gaze, a man stood up two rows ahead of me and returned it—Darson. "I understand what you're saying, Ryoma, but calm down. No one's going to speak up if you intimidate them like that."

"What's there to be intimidated about? I'm just a kid, aren't I? Plus, they believe they can just take a self-defense class and deal with the criminals themselves, so I don't see the problem here. The people who haven't said anything are ready to take up arms and risk the lives of themselves, their families, their employees... Or else kill the attacker. Are any of you ready to do that?"

"You're no ordinary kid... But when you put it like that..." Darson grimaced and turned to the podium.

"Hey, Wanz. I gotta say, as a former adventurer, Ryoma's got a point. No matter your intentions, if you get into a fight, it's survival of the fittest. I got nothing against everyone here learning self-defense tactics, but it's a bit too optimistic to say that's enough."

"Self-defense tactics are designed for limited types of situations, where you have exhausted all other options save to fight for your life. It's a last resort. You need to keep danger away from yourself. If you're planning for a fight, that's not self-defense, that's just combat training. It's not the same thing," I added.

"I see, I see... Yes, we do appreciate the input of adventurers with

real-world experience.”

I was starting to see that Wanz maintained his friendly demeanor while he pretended to accept a differing opinion before denouncing it. Guess this wasn't his first swindle. “In that case, allow me to ask the experts: what do *you* suggest we do?”

“Yeah, let's hear it!”

“Surely they're just full of ideas.”

“Hire adventurers or mercenaries,” I answered without missing a beat. I had just discussed this the other day, after all. “Bring them out of retirement if you have to. We only need to hire a good number of people who are already trained to fight, and set up a system that allows for regular patrols and emergency responses. If we share the cost, it should be less than each of us hiring our own protection. We're all merchants here, right? So we'd best act like it. Playing guards vs. robbers on our own with no training is pointless.”

Some attendees seemed to agree and a few of them began conversing with each other, when Wanz let out a dramatic sigh. “I was expecting something better,” he said.

“Care to elaborate?”

“Setting up a fund and hiring adventurers *would* bring enough fighting power to the city at a relatively low cost... But there's one big problem with that idea!” He emphasized.

“Just spit it out,” I said.

“Bluntly speaking, it will draw the ire of the nobles.”

The attendees' murmuring grew louder.

“Have you ever considered *why* guilds exist?” Wanz continued. “For nobles, I might add.”

“To manage the power and arms commoners have.” Another topic I had heard discussed the other day. Since he was being so dramatic about it, I figured I'd finish his train of thought.

For the first time, Wanz showed visible uneasiness. “If you know that, why did you even bother making that suggestion?”

“Have I struck a nerve?” I countered.

“Hey! You want to explain for the rest of us?!”

“Order!” Wanz's authority as the head of this conference was certainly strong.

“The first thing I want to clarify is that nobles always fear one thing—a revolution. They will try to protect themselves with their gold and power, of course. However, the noble population is a mere fraction of the size of the commoner population; less than a tenth, to be exact. There are numerous historical accounts of commoners banding together to rebel against the unending oppression from the nobles. And nobles fear revolution because it can happen at any time. So what do they do to protect themselves? They prevent us from

banding together.”

Wanz continued his soliloquy, playing to the attendees. “All guilds are managed by the government, under the permission of His Majesty the King, which prevents nobles from directly interfering, but they are still the ones running the country. In a roundabout way, the guilds are also ruled by the nobles. The Merchant’s Guild can track individual finances, and the Adventurer and Mercenary Guilds can track the size of individual forces. We pay the price for the benefits we receive by working through the guilds and giving our information to the nobles. If we end up concentrating too much power in one city... Well, it’s clear as day what the nobles will do. They can practically kill a revolution from their cribs.”

“B-But Wanz, no one here’s trying to start a revolution, not even that Ryoma kid.”

“Of course not! While none of us here intend to start a revolution, nobles would be wary of one organization consolidating so much power. We can argue it’s for safety, but they’ll suspect revolutionary intent anyway. That is just the way nobles think. Our intentions, in the grand scheme of things, do not matter. What matters is how our actions will appear to the nobles! There is no doubt that, if gathering such forces were to catch the nobles’ attention, everyone here who chipped in for the effort will be seen as accomplices to the revolution!”

His theatrics weren’t making things any easier to follow for the attendees.

“Really?”

“They wouldn’t go that far...”

“Would they?”

“What if...”

Concerned murmurs buzzed throughout the conference room.

“Hate to rain on your parade, but that’s not happening,” I said.

“Pardon me?”

“Anyone with their heads on straight would understand that we’re only looking to defend our shops, and would gladly permit us to do so.”

Wanz’s input was skewed towards the worst-case scenario from the get-go. I had indeed heard of examples where people had gathered enough forces to raise the suspicion of nobles. But it was also common for people to pool their money and hire adventurers or mercenaries. For some smaller villages and settlements, that was the only way they could protect themselves from monsters and bandits. Really, we didn’t need to hire any more of them than necessary.

“Some of you might know that I have a friendly relationship with the duke and his family. I’d be happy to clearly inform them of our

intentions beforehand,” I confidently stated.

“And how does that help anyone but yourself?”

“If it’d even help at all.”

“Sure, I’ve heard he has *connections* with the duke...”

“A kid like you working that out? Like that’ll ever happen. Walk the walk, don’t talk the talk.”

I got quite a bit of pushback in return. Nothing I didn’t expect, though.

Wanz chuckled. “Ryoma, my boy. I don’t think you understand just how *ordinary* merchants like us feel.”

“Yeah, if I had a noble backing me, I’d be pretty laid-back about things too. I *should* be so lucky.”

“No wonder a little punk like you can run a business.”

“Good for you, you don’t have to worry about anything. How about you shut up and let the grown-ups talk now?”

Right. Now I see how it is.

These people were technically business owners, but not in the way Serge, Pioro, and Orest were. Those three had the gall to face down nobles when it came to their business; that surely must have helped them to get to where they were now. But I could not say the same of the other people in this room. Their shops were in the city, and they made a decent, steady living from them. While they no doubt worked hard to earn their daily bread, they didn’t have the drive to expand their business. Dealing with nobles was nothing but an added risk in their eyes. They were successful, but not so successful that they could stand with the bigwigs. And it seemed that trying to convince them to put aside their fear of the nobles was a futile exercise.

“Well, I think we’re at an impasse, so I’ll be taking my leave,” I said as I rose from my seat.

“Oh? Leaving so soon?” Wanz asked.

“Yes. I’m not keen on having any more of my time wasted, and it seems unlikely we’ll be able to work out a solution anyway.”

“I bet you never wanted to work with us in the first place.”

“You sure don’t sound like the cooperative kind.”

That did it. I wasn’t about to let Wanz’s yes-men have the last word.

“And so many of *you* are such upstanding beacons of fellowship, right? Not to point fingers, but I’ve definitely sensed a lot of judgment from you people the moment I walked in here.”

I looked around the room, and many of the attendees looked away. Nothing different from when I came in. They greeted me with smiles, but I sure didn’t feel any sense of respect, or anything but an air of complete patronization. That was another difference between them and Serge or Pioro. In my defense, I *was* a kid, and I *did* rely

heavily on Carme when it came to running the shop. But I knew I wasn't a very skilled business owner on my own anyway, so I didn't see it as a point against me. I had hoped that this first meeting would allow them to understand me better, and now I was going to make damn sure that they did.

"Let me spell things out for you all. I am a child, and Carme here helps me a lot when it comes to running my shop. And I've definitely been lucky; I managed to get connections with the duke. That being said, seeing how I was invited to this so-called 'Gimul Union of Small Businesses,' you ought to know that my shop's scale and profit is comparable to all of yours. I don't care if you want to think that it's all down to the duke, or that I'm just some punk who got lucky. I kindly suggest that you *do not screw around with me*. What's it to you that I have money and connections, anyway? If you fail to understand how important those are in business, and how it gives me quite an advantage, then you're in the wrong line of work."

I finished my screed, and was met with an icy silence. *Here I was expecting at least one of the trained dogs to bark back at me. Ah, well. No skin off my nose.*

"Let's get out of here, Carme." I shook Carme, who was frozen in his seat.

"Y-Yes, sir!"

And with that, the two of us walked right out of the Merchant's Guild.

Chapter 7, Episode 7: The Walk Home

Carme and I walked in silence for some time, until I eventually decided I had to break that silence with an apology.

“Sorry I told you to shut up back there, Carme. It was definitely rude of me.”

“I know you didn’t really mean it. But answer me this...why did you act the way you did?” Carme asked quietly. He seemed to be stifling quite a bit of anger; not that I could blame him.

“I just couldn’t have you interrupting me,” I explained. “I was afraid that my shop and everyone involved with it would end up being stigmatized. I dunno what kind of crap Wanz was planning to drum into them, but I figured that if we weren’t going to cooperate, that’d end up labeling our shop as being run by a selfish little punk who won’t help his community.”

Rejecting a business venture based on inadequate info or unfavorable terms was nothing that didn’t happen in business on a daily basis. The onus lay with the people who proposed the venture in the first place, after all. Since the vibe in that conference room basically amounted to “you’re either with us or against us,” refusal to cooperate would have gotten us ostracized pretty quickly.

“One could call it a refusal to cave to pressure, but back there, it would have basically been tantamount to being an agitator. I decided to stand up to Wanz, and I came out as the heel. I only did that because I *had* to be the heel, and I didn’t want to drag you into that too.”

“I suspected as much.” Carme sighed. “Honestly, I also had a hunch that Wanz was talking out the side of his neck. It seems that, for all his bluster about working together and staying secure, he may have an ulterior motive. It seems like a reach that our whole shop would be stigmatized, but I could definitely tell that they would’ve singled us out if we refused their offer. We don’t need our reputation in this city sullied; there’s nothing to gain from that. So when you shut me down, I was confused, but I complied. You wanted to show that it was your executive decision for us to walk away; you adopted that attitude as part of your character. They do say a bad first impression is more powerful, after all. Surely many grown-ups would have a bad taste in their mouth seeing a kid they don’t know talk to them like

that. I mean, I thought you were a noble child trying to run a shop as a hobby myself at first, so I assume people there saw you in the same light. Ergo, by showing them how I listen to what you say, it gives off the impression that you're holding something over my head, ensuring they know that leaving the meeting was entirely your call."

"I'm just glad I have such a brilliant employee who can pick up whatever I put down."

"Do you think this is a bloody game?!" Carme shouted at me, something he'd never done before as long as we'd known each other. I understood that it stemmed from his concern for me, and it pained me to see that I was responsible for the look on his face.

But I stayed firm.

"No, I don't. I trust you, Carme; I know I could leave the shop to you if something were to happen. The shop can survive without me. All it needs is cleaner slimes, you, and our employees. I'm sure that Bamboo Forest will do just fine without me."

"So it's all right for *you* to fall on your sword, then? Why do you always do this to yourself?!"

"Sometimes I have to make that call. With great power comes great responsibility; a boss has to protect his employees. At least, that's how I feel. But quitting is my absolute last resort."

"Still...! Wait, last resort?"

"Of course. Is that so surprising? Just because I'm prepared for the worst doesn't mean I'm gonna let everything I've worked for go to waste. I won't go down without a fight."

That conference was rather akin to a bear trap—once you put your foot in it, you weren't getting out without a scratch. Although we were shrewd enough to see through the trap and got out while we could, we still refused to take part in their endeavor, which must have given the attendees who were agreeing with Wanz a bad impression. I'd experienced more than my fair share of the pushback that comes with going against the majority, as well as the risk and retaliation involved, so I wanted to be ready to fall on the metaphorical sword if need be. That was my duty as their boss, not to mention the right thing to do. That being said...

"The possibility of us being stigmatized is just that—a possibility. We don't know what will happen, so I have no intention of giving myself up before it's necessary. Besides, it's not like I've done anything illegal. Even if it comes to that, you'll be the manager in name, and I'll give my take on the business and receive a portion of the profit as the financial backer; pretty much the same system we have now."

Even if we could no longer do business in Gimul, we could just move the shop to another town, like Gaunago. Reinhart personally asked me to set up a branch in Gaunago when the right opportunity

appeared, and fortunately for us, none of the employees in the Gimul branch, save for Dolce, the security guard, were from Gimul. They would have gotten into the routine by now after working here for a year, but I doubted any of them had any special attachment to the city. Both Gimul and Gaunago were in Jamil's territory, and they were close enough for Dolce to come home to Gimul regularly. Of course, I would have to ask how everyone felt about it. This was just an example of a potential countermeasure we could take.

"So what I'm trying to say is...I understand you're worried about me, but please don't make such a face. Let's focus on what we can do moving forward, so we can avoid the worst case scenario. We need to reassess our situation so we can make the correct move, especially after we've screwed up. And I need your help for that. Can you do this for me?" I asked.

Carme silently opened and closed his mouth a few times, his expression shifting at each attempt. He didn't seem to know whether to be sad or angry. After a long exhale, Carme finally spoke.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I was the one who asked in the first place, and I now see that you might have been speaking of the 'worst-case scenario' the whole time."

"Right."

"I admit I jumped to conclusions on my end. But let me say this—you certainly didn't help with my misunderstanding!"

"I'm sorry." That's all I could say.

Carme let out another sigh. "I'm just frustrated. Just the other day, I told you that I'm here to support you."

"Yes, you did."

"Today, I nearly allowed myself to be manipulated by that Wanz character, and almost made you consider sacrificing yourself for the shop. Furthermore, you said everything I should have come up with myself as your assistant. We may not have time to dwell on the past, but are you sure you want me in this role?" Carme gave a weak laugh. "This may sound strange coming from me, but you are still young, and it didn't seem like many people at that conference would outsmart you... Do you believe you are on equal footing with Serge as a merchant?"

"Oh, no! Master Serge has a great deal more experience than me. I wouldn't dare entertain the idea."

"That's what I figured. Serge has experienced many successes, and has overcome many failures. Compared to him, even the two of us together are quite inexperienced. But we can change that; we still have plenty of time to gain more experience and learn new things."

“Yes... You’re right,” Carme said. “But it’s rather mysterious... It’s times like this I get the feeling that you’re older than me.”

I chuckled nervously in response, but Carme didn’t dwell on it.

“As callow as I am, when I say that I am here to support you, I mean every word of it. I would love to hear more about your philosophy on how a boss should be, perhaps at a later date. If you’ll keep me on, sir, I hope we can continue working together.”

“Likewise.”

“That said, I still need to discuss some things with you, including your choice to set up that self-sacrifice. You’ll need to set some time aside for that.”

“What?”

“I have also been instructed by Master Serge and the duke to inform them if anything happens, so I will be reporting what happened to them.”

“Report?! Don’t you work for me, Carme?!”

“I do, but I still have some *acquaintances*... It will merely be friendly gossip. After all, who doesn’t like to gossip about their boss’s bothersome habits?”



Okay, fair enough, it's not like he's gonna be telling them confidential info, but I can't tell whether he's actually upset or just trying to tease me in retaliation!

"Uh, I only said we're *preparing* for a possible worst-case scenario... It's not like that scenario is actually real right now, is it?"

"Then surely you wouldn't mind me sharing that information."

"Can't we talk about this?"

"About our next move? Certainly. At the very least, we won't be showing our faces in that conference again..."

Carme continued to prod me as we continued down the street. Guess I got what I deserved there...

"Huh? Are we expecting any guests today?" I asked as the shop came into view.

"Guests? Are you trying to change the topic again?"

"Nope. Look over there."

Three unfamiliar carriages were parked in the empty lot next to the shop. I feared the worst, but I didn't sense any immediate danger, and neither did the weed slimes I'd hidden in the bushes on the lot, evidently.

"That is strange... I don't imagine three carriages would just park there at random."

"Let's see what's going on inside the shop."

When we made our way in...

"Welcome back, Master Ryoma."

"Hey, Ryoma! You're looking pretty good!"

I was greeted by Lulunese, the duke's maid, and Hughes, as well as many other acquaintances waiting for me inside the shop.

Chapter 7, Episode 8: Reinforcements Arrive

First things first, I had to take in my surroundings. In the office stood Carme and myself, greeted by the duke's guards Hughes, Jill, Zeph, and Camil, as well as the maids Lulunese, Lilian, and Liviola. And finally, for some reason, Glissela, the master of the Merchant's Guild, was also present. Our office seemed a little cramped with this big of a crowd present. Having offered our only chair to Glissela, there were a bunch of questions on my mind, but I had to start with the most obvious one.

"What brings you all here?"

Hughes piped up to answer. "We're here on the duke's orders. You were looking to get permits for some establishments, like the one that outsources security, right?"

"Yes, I was. I had been considering setting up a security company as a countermeasure against the rising crime in Gimul, and discussed the expected hurdles and solutions to those hurdles with the guildmasters before requesting a permit from the duke to establish it."

A single letter should have sufficed to answer that request, though. Even if Reinhart wanted to send a messenger, he didn't need to send this many.

"Well, long story short, the duke has approved all aspects of the project," Hughes continued. "I mean, there's no downside for the duke or the city at large, so there's no reason to refuse."

"If it comes to fruition, I can expect great revenue, even as a small portion of the project, not to mention the nonmonetary compensation. I tried to set the numbers to give more benefits to the duke and the workers as much as I could to encourage him to approve the project."

"That's the problem!"

"Problem?"

"He could approve the project, but your current proposal makes it look like the duke's being too greedy. If he gives it his approval with just a letter, it could look like he's doing nothing and reaping all the benefits. That's why we... Why were we here again?"

You're the one who came all the way here, so you tell me, dammit!

An exasperated Jill took over the explaining duties. "The duke wants to add a condition to the proposal, appointing Hughes as the manager and trainer of the guards. While he's not showing his full

potential today, Hughes was recently promoted, and will soon have guards working under him at the duke's. He would appreciate the opportunity to gain more managerial experience at your company. I will help run the organization as well, to complement this forgetful new chief. I believe you could use experienced trainers to train the new hires. If it comes to someone complaining about the project, they wouldn't have a leg to stand on against the two of the duke's guards being responsible for the quality of the staff."

"I couldn't ask for anyone better. Does that mean everyone else is here for...?"

"That is correct." Lulunese, a cat beastkin and Hughes's wife, stepped forward. "You know our housekeeper, Araune. She is at the age where manual labor is becoming more difficult. She has decided to select candidates for her successor, and begin training them to take over her post. As with the head of security, the housekeeper must be able to train new hires, lead her subordinates, as well as make executive decisions and perform secretarial duties. Lilian, Liviola, and myself were commanded to assist you, Master Ryoma, to test our skills. From this day until we are relieved by the duke, please put us to whatever work you see fit."

"Whatever" work...? Gimme a break.

"We've been told to help out with the security project, but feel free to ask for our help on anything you need an extra hand with. It's all up to you."

"I don't like heavy lifting, so keep me backstage if you can."

"Zeph, Camil..."

That whole spiel about gaining experience or picking the new housekeeper seemed like a poor excuse; it seemed more like Reinhart just wanted to send them over to help me out. They'd been wonderful to me before, and they were all undoubtedly talented. Considering how busy things were going to get, I was very grateful for their offer. Besides, the fact that they came all the way here to tell me this meant they weren't going to take no for an answer, not that I would have turned them down anyway.

"Thank you so much, everyone. That would be wonderful help. I'd love to discuss the details later... But what brings you here, guildmaster?"

"I've been talking to them. I knew they'd show up sooner or later."

"You knew?!"

"You think you're the only one who keeps in touch with the duke? You know what's going on in the city."

I suppose the guild masters would be taking their own action against the rise in crime themselves...

“Besides, you’ve been acting weird lately,” Glissela added.

“Well—”

“What? You don’t think I’d notice, after talking to you these past few days?”

“It’s not that...”

After what transpired at the conference, I couldn’t help but give Carme a quick glance.

“That’s right, you two went out to that conference at the guild, right? Hosted by the ‘Gimul Union of Small Businesses,’ or something. I had a hunch they seemed suspicious, but it looks like something went down. Tell me about it.”

She caught on from that split-second that something had gone wrong, and where it went wrong. Realizing that I couldn’t hide it, I proceeded to explain everything that happened during and after the conference.

Glissela stared at me once I’d finished. “You know, sometimes I can’t tell whether you’re really smart or really dumb. I’ve had my eyes on Wanz myself.”

“Really?”

“The Merchant’s Guild’s looking into things as well. He certainly caught our attention, but he hasn’t done anything brazen yet, and there aren’t any red flags on his record. I can’t just order searches or fines levied on him based only on my own intuition.”

Of course, if the guild could do things like that without any proof, that would be a bigger problem than the rise in crime.

“We’ve just let him be... But emotions can be a tricky thing. Logic doesn’t always work on people who are really angry. A solid business deal can get ruined by one little aside. Now, I appreciate your determination to protect your shop and employees at all costs, but you really didn’t have to go as far as you did...”

“Cut him some slack. Ryoma’s still young, so he needs *gusto*. Right?” Hughes threw his arm around my shoulder, but the height difference nearly threw me off-balance.

“Well, at least *you’re* not as stubborn about accepting help. Let’s say you and your employee here have grown a bit.”

“Th-Thank you.”

I guess I’m off the hook? Though it feels like I just passed an exam with a D-minus.

At this point, a knock came at the door.

“Yes?”

Carme swiftly went out and came back in. A little dismayed, he said, “Sir, Sieg and Miss Pauline are back...”

To pick up their children, I assume. This could get a little awkward.
“Accompanied by Darson from the Digger Armory. They want to talk

to you.”

“Darson? All right, where are they?”

“I let them into the floor.”

I went out to the front of the house after a quick word to everyone in the office, and they saw me coming out.

“Good evening. Did the conference conclude after I left?”

“Who knows? We bailed on it.”

Wait, what?

“Why...?”

“You opened our eyes, Ryoma,” said Sieg. “We were starting to accept what he was saying, being in that space... But your objections brought us back to our senses. After you left, all the other attendees started speaking up as well.”

“Some people even left before we did. You know some of them, Ryoma.” Pauline told me their names; they were the people working at shops that I’d patronized when I went out into town to buy things I needed.

“We didn’t want to bring a huge group along at this hour, but everyone wants to apologize to you. We, the grown-ups, dropped the ball, so we left you with the short end of the stick. I’m sorry.”

The men joined in her apology, which I accepted.

Darson had something to add as well. “Even the folks who didn’t leave when we did were probably a little doubtful themselves from the start; most of them, at least. It was a madhouse right up until we left. How do I put this... Your courage wasn’t in vain, Ryoma.”

“I’m glad to hear it, then.” I felt as though some of the weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

“Looks like everything worked out,” Glissela said as she emerged from the office, the rest of my guests following behind her. I had noticed them watching the conversation with concern, but the way they all flooded out of the office at once startled Sieg, Pauline, and Darson, so I explained why I had them crammed in my office to calm them down.

“So you’re saying you had this planned all along, having requested permission from the duke? It’s just like the solution you presented of hiring professional fighters.”

“You could say that.”

“Well, you could have mentioned it when... Well, I guess you did, kind of.”

“I hadn’t yet received word from the duke. Even though I was confident how he’d respond, I don’t think I could have convinced them without proof.”

“If I had known, I would have rushed back here on horseback...”

“Well, no sense dwelling on it. Just a case of poor timing.”

I turned to my guests from the duke's residence. "Can I assume that we'll be able to start working on more concrete solutions now?" I asked, and they all gave me their wholehearted assurance.

"Ryoma," Sieg called. "If you like, you can talk to us anytime you need help."

"Really?!"

"Of course. No sense in holding back with us now. I'll talk to the people who walked out of the conference with us. I'd trust them much more than that Wanz character, anyway."

"That's a good idea," Darson said. "Maybe we should host our own meeting."

We shared a laugh at this, and called it a day after exchanging a few pleasantries.

As I stood outside the shop to watch them leave, Glissela called me over from her carriage. "Come here, Ryoma."

Once I was a few steps away, a cane slid out of the carriage door and pulled me in.

"Listen well, Ryoma. You need a realistic outlook to run a business. It's just a fact that pipe dreams kill businesses like yours. And it's also a fact that people won't let themselves be ruled under an iron fist for very long. To be a top-class merchant, you need to be soft enough to preach your ideals and protect your people, and hard enough to look at the numbers instead of your feelings, and make cuts where you have to. Of course, you're capable of playing both those roles; you just suck at switching between them. You've got to be *smooth*... Anyway, don't forget about what happened today. Take a good look at everyone around you, and stay true to your convictions. You need to believe in yourself."

She concluded her lecture with a gentle, yet firm look, and then took her cane off my shoulder. Without waiting for my response, she quickly switched back to her usual manner of speaking. "Next time, you'd better come and visit me at the guild."

Then, the carriage door closed, and the carriage sped off towards the Merchant's Guild.



Chapter 7, Episode 9: Three-Day Weekend, Day 1

The morning after the surprise visit from Hughes, Lulunese, and the others from the duke's residence offering to help with my projects for the foreseeable future, I was more excited than ever to get to work. And according to my work schedule, today I...

"...have the day off."

Not like grumbling about it was going to change the reality of the situation.

Since I got back from Fatoma, I hadn't taken a single day of R and R for myself, and the guild masters had all dutifully relayed directly to the duke that the first thing I did upon returning was to visit them and Serge.

And so, an offer I quite literally couldn't refuse was thrust upon me—all my work would be delegated to the newly hired and *very* capable help for the next three days. It was like they'd put me on reverse house arrest, except the "house" in this case was my shop. At the very least, I had to put my foot down at their offer to cook all of my meals and basically wait on me the whole time... Whatever. Basically, you get the picture. No work for three days straight, lest I become a dull boy.

I'd made plans for myself for the last day of this impromptu vacation, but today and tomorrow, my schedule was wide open. Which meant there was only one logical thing to do all day...

"Slime experimentation!"

I'd barely had any time to do that lately, and I'd been wanting to properly catalog the slimes I had, which were still actively evolving from the feed I'd acquired in Fatoma. Plus, there were some things I wanted to try out with the acidic cleaner. No time like the present!



The day whizzed by, and by the time darkness had set in, I'd managed to sit myself down with the intent of getting all my notes on the experiments I'd done in order. Firstly, I made a simple table cataloging my slimes, what they ate, and what they'd evolve into. Something like this:

Pre-Evolved Form → Hypothesis Based on Feed → Actual Evolution

- Sticky Slime → Crab Slime → Spider Slime
- " → Crustacean Slime → Crust Slime
- " → Net Slime → Fiber Slime
- Acid Slime → Seashell Slime → Shell Slime
- " → Seashell & Egg Slime → Pearl Slime
- Poison Slime → Charcoal & Sand Slime → Filter Slime
- " → Stinger Slime → Sting Slime
- Metal Slime → Net Slime → Wire Slime
- Bloody Slime → Parasite Slime → TBD
- Stone Slime → Sandy Slime → Sand Slime
- " → Porcelain Slime → TBD
- Weed Slime → Watergrass Slime → Aquatic Weed Slime
- " → Duckweed Slime → Algae Slime

Next, I wrote down my observations on the newest slime evolutions. Starting from the top, I had three sticky slime evolutions.

Spider Slime

Appearance: Similar to sticky slime, but smaller.

Skills: No skills lost from evolution; new skills Nesting and Trapper acquired.

Note: The spider slime began constructing webs on the walls of the mines, and uses its silk to move through the air like a spider. Its silk seems to have different properties from that of a sticky slime; I conducted an experiment by asking both a sticky slime and spider slime to weave the most durable silk it could, wrapping my arms between them and tearing them apart. As a result, I discovered that the spider slime silk was more elastic, and seemed more durable (based only on personal experience). Even on Earth, spider silk was viewed as a fabric with highly efficient structure and properties. Sticky slime silk is already durable, so the spider slime silk may have a structural advantage. Plan to ask a specialist about its utility as materials. This also might be a smaller specimen; I will calculate their average size once I have more of this evolution.

Crust Slime

Appearance: Identical to sticky slime.

Skills: No skills lost from evolution; new skill Molting acquired.

Note: Moulting is a skill where the slime hardens its secretions. A hardened surface layer does not impede their movement; it seems to be strictly an upgrade to their defensive capabilities. Upon appraisal, I found their hardened secretions had almost the same properties as the hardening solution I created. Checks out, since my hardening solution came from

sticky slimes. Upon command, the crust slime could spread the same secretion on a flat surface to produce the same results as the hardening solution. With the crust slime, I can now use the hardening solution without alchemy... However, the crust slime seems very similar to the sticky slime in nature; the same can be said of the spider slime. They seem to be evolutions that maintain the original slime's characteristics, enhancing them with the nature of another creature.

Fiber Slime

Appearance: Identical to sticky slime.

Skills: No skills lost from evolution; new skill Fiberfy acquired.

Note: By giving it shavings from a fluff slime, I can create slime rayon.

Maybe I can turn other things into fiber? E.G., giving it metal or glass to create wire or fiberglass. Should look more into this.

Then, I noted the two that evolved from acid slimes.

Shell Slime

Appearance: Conceals itself in a turban shell; rather like a hermit crab.

Skills: No skills lost from evolution; Harsh Acid Production skill changed to Gentle Acid Production, and new skill Shell Production acquired.

Note: This may be the most surprising evolution yet. For one, its appearance drastically changed. I looked into the "gentle acid," and it turned out to be a highly dense succinic acid, with plenty of the umami found in many shellfish. While it can't be consumed as is, I'm able to adjust its composition to turn it into sodium succinate and use it as seasoning. The ersatz Worcestershire sauce I made with it for a late lunch turned out good.

Pearl Slime

Appearance: Milky white with a unique sheen. Rather like a giant pearl.

Skills: Perhaps derived from its shift from the gelatinous form of an acid slime to a more metallic one, it has a drastically different skill set from an acid slime. Skills of particular note are Protective Mucus Secretion, Cover Up, and Crystallize.

Note: Its skills allow me to create pearls, a precious commodity in this world. This slime's like a license to print money. While it isn't dangerous in and of itself, it needs to be handled with caution.

And two more from the poison slime.

Filter Slime

Appearance: Dry and blackened overall. With refracting speckles here and there, it looks like a clump of black sand.

Skills: Changing form from a gelatinous one to a dry, nearly solid one seemed to result in the loss of most poison slime skills. However, the remaining poison resistance is reinforced, and it acquired one new skill—Filtration.

Note: From my experiments, it seems this slime can filter poison and buildup from liquids and gasses that pass through them. Also confirmed that the Filtration skill can be used to help compound medicine and serve as a water purifier. Plenty of potential for medical applications, like using it as a gas mask or combining it with a bloody slime. Dialysis, perhaps?

Sting Slime

Appearance: More pronounced purple hue, obscuring its core.

Skills: No skills lost from evolution; new skill Stinger acquired.

Note: With the Stinger skill, as I found out upon command, it produces countless spikes, like a sea urchin; the resemblance was further reinforced by its color. It more closely resembled the long-spiked variation. Since it retained the Spear Mastery skill, I asked it to make one thick stinger and use it as a spear, which it did. Furthermore, it still maintained the syringe-like structure of the stinger, allowing it to inject venom. I think it took after the stingers of its feed, but all things considered, this was pretty gnarly. That being said, the ability to inject poison on impact would be effective in combat. For instance... Well, maybe it's better off not writing this down.

Next came one each from the metal slime...

Wire Slime

Appearance: Identical to metal slime, but slightly smaller.

Skills: No lost skills; Stretch newly acquired.

Note: It can stretch itself into a thin wire, and even shape its elongated form into a saw or barbed wirelike form. Its maximum length corresponds to its mass; it cannot stretch or change the shape of its core.

...and the stone slime respectively.

Sand Slime

Appearance: A clump of sand.

Skills: It lost stone slime skills from the change in form, but acquired Disperse, Condense, Absorb Moisture, and Dry Out—which it shares with ash slimes—as well as the Synchronize skill previously seen in mud slimes.

Note: I noticed something while experimenting. More notes to follow after further experimentation...

Last, but not least, were two new evolutions from the weed slime.

Aquatic Weed Slime

Appearance: Watergrass visible floating in the slime's body, like a glassless aquarium.

Skills: Same as the weed slime's.

Note: While its abilities stayed the same through evolution, it now lives in water. It can survive for some time out of water, but doesn't seem to like living on land. I made a tank with the hardening solution for the time being. I plan to upgrade to a bigger tank or make a pond habitat, weather permitting. Feeding them was easy, since they grew and ate their own watergrass or got their nutrients from photosynthesis, just as the weed slimes do. Their ease of care and their aquarium-like curb appeal makes this a good candidate as a first recommendation when converting people to the way of the slime.

Algae Slime

Appearance: A lump of green algae.

Skills: Same as weed slime.

Note: They live in water, like the aquatic weed slime. It grows and eats its own algae, and also utilizes photosynthesis. I took a small portion of the algae that covers their body and appraised it to find that it was packed with various nutrients. A type of moss called euglena, for example, was being studied on Earth for its potential application in supplements and health foods. Maybe I can use the algae slimes in a similar manner. I plan to build a dedicated tank or pond for them, so they can produce enough algae for me to experiment on.

That seemed like a good summary of the day. To be honest, there were plenty more experiments I wanted to run, and I could have kept going. If they were to find out that I was working with slimes through the night, though, I feared that they would force one of the maids to stay with me all day... Maybe I was actually learning a bit of self-control?

“...Nah.”

It was still a bit early, so I decided to prepare for the days ahead. Eventually, night fell and I called it for today...

Chapter 7, Episode 10: Three-Day Weekend, Day 2

The next morning, I awoke fully prepared to do more slime research. I also planned to do some experiments on magic and magical elements. First up, I asked for the help of a mud slime and a sand slime, who inspired my hypothesis for the day.

“Of course, I only have one sand slime so far...” I prepared a pile of sand and a pile of dirt for the slimes to use their Synchronize skill on, then set them to work once everything was ready.

“Hm. No surprise here...”

The slimes began to disappear into the pile of sand and dirt. Even when they were completely invisible, the slimes were still there; they just completely blended into the sand and dirt. I doubted they would withstand a magical blast that obliterated their respective materials, but no physical attack would harm them in this state. Most surprisingly, though, the slimes did not have their cores—their most vulnerable spot—in this state. They truly became sand and dirt themselves. At the same time, they still maintained their sentience, if one could even call it that. On command, they could revert to their slime forms, or continue to move in their coreless state. After seeing not one, but two species of slimes using this skill in action, I was forced to confront the reality of this skill.

After witnessing this, I wondered how this was possible, and set my eye on magical energy for a few reasons. Firstly, normal, non-evolved slimes somehow disappear when they die, leaving their core behind. Secondly, I’d discovered through observing and experimenting with magical slimes and their evolutions that those slimes absorb magical energy, with some specimens preferring one specific element over the others. And finally, there was one time when I asked a poison slime to use a spear-shaped magical item, and while it was able to do so, it showed signs of exhaustion and shrinkage in the process.

These observations contributed to my hypothesis that slimes were composed of magical energy. The basic law of magic dictated that magical energy dispersed when released from the spellcaster’s control. If slimes were magical energy taking form, their bodies disappearing at death would make sense. Furthermore, I hypothesized that if their bodies were composed of magical energy, the Synchronization skill was a magic spell. While I obviously had to watch out for explaining

everything away as “magic did it,” it was still a force powerful enough to make the impossible possible.

Also, a hundred slimes made a big slime, and five hundred of them made a huge slime. Perhaps their merging together wasn't a spell in itself, but the result of a natural force or property in the magical energy of the slimes that enabled merging and synchronization.

Today, I decided to focus on my second observation—slimes absorb magical energy, and some of them prefer particular elements over the rest.

“I'll just double check this...”

I tested which elements the two Synchronizing slimes preferred. The mud slime favored earth and water while the sand slime preferred earth and wind. I had gotten the same results the day before.

“So the *mud* slime prefers earth and water...”

There was even a category of spells called mud magic, that combined the earth and water elements. This hardly seemed like a coincidence. I even had a thought about the combination of earth and wind magic that the sand slime preferred.

“Polish Wheel.”

Earth magic converted the dirt to sand, which a wind picked up and began rapidly whirring around. This was one of my original spells that used the rapid movement of the sand grains to buff or polish things. I had designed it out of necessity and named it off the top of my head—a wheel-shaped thing I used to polish materials. In hindsight, maybe Sand Blaster would have been a better name.

This little spell I had pulled out of my pocket could reasonably be categorized as sand magic, just like mud magic. Was there a pattern in which elements which slimes preferred, and their application in spells?

“Well, I don't have enough data yet.”

I decided to test other slimes, and considered which of them would prefer two specific elements. Then I thought of the ash slime, which preferred wood and fire magic. That was pretty intuitive when I visualized trees burning to ash.

“Now what spell should I make... Ash!” I called, casting a spell simply to create some ash like the Water spell. Lo and behold, fire and wood magical energy combined, changing into ash flakes falling to the ground. “Another success... I'm starting to enjoy myself here.”

The next slime that came to mind was the acid slime. Just as I mentally noted that it preferred poison and water magic, it occurred to me that the opposite of acid, alkaline, found its etymology in ashes.

I mixed the ashes into water, and true enough, it tested as alkaline... It seemed plausible that I could make an alkaline solution

by combining ash (i.e., fire and wood) with water, but that would require the same caution in handling as acid. I decided to prepare more thoroughly before experimenting any further.



Twenty minutes later, I had a successful experiment on my hands. Combining three elements required some finesse, but I managed to create an alkaline solution by combining fire, wood, and water. However, when I tried to create acid from scratch by combining poison and water to counteract the alkaline, I failed. Where did I go wrong?

“Come to think of it, I’ve hardly ever used poison magic... Seems redundant with all the poison and medicine slimes I have. Maybe I should start studying poison magic from the basics...”

I continued to review the preferred elements of the other slimes, performing trial and error on any combination that seemed like I could cast, and making notes of observations and questions along the way. After casting magic at such a fast pace, I had expended most of my magical energy by the afternoon, although not quite to the point of making me feel ill. I decided to end my research for the day.

“Right, guess I’m out of things to do now...”

After pondering over this conundrum, I decided to make lunch. Afterwards, I decided to play with the slimes and prepare for the next day. When I was preparing their dinner after playing with them, I decided to give ash to the weed slimes that liked wood magic and *fifty-three* of them responded positively to the ash. It seemed I had much to learn about the relationship between slimes and magic.

Chapter 7, Episode 11: Three-Day Weekend, Day 3

On the morning of my last day off for the weekend, I was standing near the entrance to the abandoned mines.

“There it is!”

I spotted a carriage coming my way, up the road that led to Gimul. Seeing Lilian and Hudom confirmed my presumptions. I waved to the carriage to let them know where I was, and showed them to a suitable parking spot. Then, Fina, Maria, and Jane emerged from the carriage; I quickly greeted them.

“Good morning, everyone. Thanks for coming all the way out here.”

“My, how the time flew by!”

“This is quite a lovely carriage.”

“The one in the village is much more of a rickety thing than this.”

“So I see. Looks like a real nice piece of work,” I remarked. The carriage was one of the three I had seen parked in the empty lot by the shop before; since it brought my guests from the duke’s, I had pegged it to be a decidedly high-end carriage.

“Nice? It’s an *exceptional* piece of work.”

“I suspected as much, Hudom.”

“The duke was simply going to throw it away. Please, call us whenever you need it.”

“Thank you.”

Incredibly, this carriage (along with another one) had been loaned to me. Apparently, Reinhart left a message for me, to the effect of “expect to be very busy in due time,” and that this would probably help me get around somewhat easier. Hence why I was using one for a personal errand. Of course, the free transportation and assistance from the duke wasn’t all I had to be grateful for.

While I was out two nights prior, not only did all my employees (save for Carme) babysit the children from next door, but they were also there to greet the guildmaster and the duke’s employees. They later asked for an explanation for my absence, so I gave them one, only for them to offer their assistance there as well. I happily accepted, and today, they were out here with me to learn the basics of farming from the three farm girls.

“Thanks again for coming out here in your free time.”

“Ha ha! Why so stiff?”

“We owe you, after all you’ve done for us. It’s the least we can do.”

“I, for one, am simply happy I can pay you back for a change. But what’s with your sudden interest in farming?”

“Oh, I guess I haven’t told you yet...” I explained how farming would apparently help to improve the finesse of my wood magic. Of course, the part about the god of agriculture being the one to clue me in on that was my little secret.

“I see. That makes sense.”

“You sure you want us around? Magic is totally uncharted territory to us.”

“Don’t sweat it, Fina. Learning the spell’s subject is crucial for learning magic.”

“See? Hudom gets it,” I said. He took the words right out of my... Wait, what? “Are you a magic user too?”

“Yeah, but I’m far from a pro at it. I can use some wood magic, plus I’m decent enough at water magic to water plants.”

“That’s great!” Knowing Hudom had magical knowledge made him seem all the more reliable. Now I was actually looking forward to knowing him better... “Follow me, I’ve got a little space set up.”

I took them to the west end of the mines, where there was a decent-sized patch of level land. I had rushed to clean up all of the overgrown weeds, so when the others, particularly the farm girls, suddenly stopped and stared, I started to wonder if I’d overlooked something.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, uh...”

“Isn’t that a greenhouse over there?”

Indeed it was. Part of the plot was on level ground, but it also hosted the greenhouse I’d tried building, seeing how cold it was this winter. I took my inspiration from plastic-covered greenhouses, but I had used the hardened solution of sticky and crust slimes, which made it look like a glass-covered construction. At this point, I realized that glass was a rare commodity in this country. Of course, they were surprised to see a building that looked like it was made entirely of glass.

“Oh, so all that isn’t really glass?”

“I almost had a heart attack.”

“That’s what we use for the windows in the shop. I should have known...”

“Most impressive,” said Hudom. “Greenhouses aren’t a common thing, even among nobles.”

Guess that explains their reaction, then.

I showed them into the greenhouse, where it was much warmer, thanks to the hardened solution which blocked wind but allowed sunlight in. It was noticeably muggier than outside. Of course, one could open the vents positioned on either side of the greenhouse as well as above the doors on either end, but I figured some sort of system to adjust the temperature and humidity in the greenhouse seemed more beneficial.

“Now, where shall we start from?” I asked.

“Can you show us what you normally do first?” Fina spoke up. “We would like to see how you farm with magic.”

“Absolutely!”

At their request, I started my usual routine. I softened the ground with earth magic, had the scavengers mix in fertilizer and build a ridge, had the sticky slimes plant seeds, watered them with water magic, encouraged their growth with wood magic...

“*Voilà!*” I had a field of dante flowers. They were a very useful flower, since I could produce cooking oil from their seed, steep their roots in a dandelion coffee, and feed their stems to some sticky and latex slime.

But... Everyone was still silent.

“Um...”

“Goodness... What can one even say to this?”

“Magic is quite amazing.”

The girls seemed impressed, albeit a bit confused as to the process, while Lilian didn’t seem surprised, since she had seen the process before at the duke’s, but still wore a half smile.

Hudom, meanwhile, seemed positively astounded. “Wha... What in the...? What is this? Some kind of illusion spell?”

“Uh, Hudom? Is something the matter?”

“What *isn’t* the matter?! You made these sprout and grow in the blink of an eye! All of these! Just now!”

“C-Calm down!” I pleaded. I wasn’t following his excited rambling.

“R-Right... Sorry about that. It was just such a shock, I couldn’t help but get carried away. Do you have a lot of magic ability, chief?”

“I do, but a big factor is the scavenger slimes making good-quality fertilizer that helps the plants grow.”

“In that case, your slimes and the fertilizer they produce are incredible. I’ve studied a fair amount of *normal* fertilizers made from manure and compost, and even potions that help with plant growth. I doubt there are many of them out there that could reproduce this effect. I know of some that *might*, but powerful potions have strong side effects. As far as I can tell, these dantes are completely normal. Thriving, even. The average mage would have run out of magic,”

Hudom muttered.

I turned to the girls.

“We don’t use potions for this in the village.”

“They’re too expensive.”

“We’d need a lot if we’re intending to use it all over the farm.”

They answered with virtual resignation.

“You do know a lot about the subject, Hudom,” I said.

“My family’s been the royal gardeners for generations. All that stuff was drilled into me when I was a kid.”

That explained his expertise, but if his family were always the royal gardeners, whom I assumed were tasked with maintaining the palace grounds...

“You’re a noble, Hudom? I had no idea.”

“Well... My family has a barony, but I ran away. Not that I have the right to use the family name, anyway, but the title’s only driven friends away in my travels, or made people turn down my challenge, or scared girls away. I’ve made a habit out of not talking about it.”

I had seen some people become intimidated by the mere mention of nobility, which I assumed made his task of challenging someone in a fair duel a bit troubling. Not that I cared much about his title, nor wanted to dig into someone’s past they didn’t want to share.

“My old man’s a baron of the robe, anyway. It doesn’t really mean much,” Hudom chuckled. “So don’t treat me any differently,” he said to the girls.

They seemed a bit taken aback by how quickly he turned it around.

“Are you sure?” Fina asked.

“Of course! Like I said, it’s just that my old man works at a castle. His work isn’t much different from any other gardener. And I left that behind. I don’t have any power. I think our shopkeeper has a lot more power than me, seeing how easy it was for him to get the duke’s help.”

“You have a point!”

“That’s all it takes?!” I protested, as the three girls, and even Lilian, nodded along in realization. *What’s going on? I’ll admit I’d always thought I was treated very well.*

“Not in a bad way, of course,” Hudom added, and the girls chimed in.

I decided to return to my agricultural studies.

“From what you’ve shown us, you didn’t interact with the flowers in their growing process.”

“Normally you have to weed out the field and cull the weak flowers out.”

“I see... I knew there should have been a selection process, but I

didn't know which ones to cull. I figured I could just pour magic into the less healthy ones and they'll turn out the same."

"Wood magic can make plants grow," Hudom explained. "But it costs a bunch of magic, and rapid growth can hurt the plants themselves. So even magical growth should be spread out over days, keeping your magic expenditure per plant and the damage you deal on them lower. Even the plants that don't grow as much or get sick have the strength to grow strong themselves. Instead of forcing them to bloom, you want to help them grow on their own."

After receiving some more pointers about my magical agriculture...

"Now let's move on to growing crops! Chelma gave me some potatoes that have sprouted! We can just plant these as is, and they're easy to grow!"

"You brought something too, Jane? I brought some beans that could be grown with magic."

"I have some wheat as well."

Using some seeds that I had and the girls had brought, I started my hands-on training.

"Stop!"

"You need to cull them right about now."

"Something you need to look out for..."

"Hey, let's replant the less healthy ones over here. You could practice more wood magic on them."

And eventually, I learned how to grow crops I'd never grown before.

"When wheat grows to this point, you need to step on them."

"You need to take more time with these beans..."

While I hastened their growth with magic, they made sure to teach me critical steps I needed to take along the way.

Every time I learned something new, I was made painfully aware that my previous method was carried by the brute force of magic. All in all, I wound up learning a lot on what was ostensibly my day off.



Chapter 7, Episode 12: After Playtime, Part 1

The next morning, being finally permitted to return to business as usual after my forced respite, I excitedly commuted down the mountain into Gimul.

“Good morning!” I called out to a guard at the northern gate as he let me into the city, and I ran straight to the slums.

When I arrived at the large, ancient building, I found a crowd gathered nearby.

“Excuse me... Coming through...” I parted through the crowd to find the seven sent to me from the duke, as well as Serge, Arnold, and Lible, leader of the slums. Guards and carriages surrounded them, making them stand out from the rest of the population. I decided to go and greet them.

“Master Ryoma. We still have some time until our appointment, so don’t worry.”

“We just got here early. The kids aren’t ready either.”

Serge and Lible gave me the rundown. The kids Lible mentioned were the children inhabiting the building in front of us; just one of the many dilapidated “orphanages” of the slums, where children without homes all lived together.

“I’m always astonished by how old the building looks,” I remarked. And “old” was putting it kindly.

“Naturally. According to official records, this building was constructed as a storage unit for the materials used to build the rest of the city. As construction continued, the storage units were moved and added on, until the unused units were sold to private owners. Some of them, like this one, have not weathered the sands of time very well.”

The information Arnold gave explained a few things about the building. The stone construction seemed to prioritize sturdiness and utility of space, with little to no curb appeal. There were two entrances each on the front and back of the building, each large enough for a carriage to ride right up to, allowing for efficient loading and unloading of materials. Perhaps out of concern for theft, the doors on those entrances were thick and were adorned with minimal windows. A large wall encircled the building, and there was even a relic of a heavy gate that separated the main grounds from the street. The best thing you could say about the craftsmanship on display here

was that the whole thing hadn't caved in on itself years ago. Of course, it just looked like an abandoned building to me, and one completely unsuitable for housing children at that.

"Lible, come clean with me. As soon as the children are ready and out of the building, we can make sure it's empty and begin the demolition, right?"

"The faster we do this, the faster you can get to building them their new homes, yeah? We'll look after them while you're at it, but speed's of the essence here. It'd make the kids happier to have a new home sooner rather than later."

In spite of his stoic look, Lible quite clearly cared about these children. Small wonder why he took me up on my offer and reached out to the owner of the building, as well as people willing to act as foster parents along with the children themselves, just so we could make all this happen. While the main objective of the project was for me to build a trash processing plant and accompanying factories, he made it clear to all parties that lending me assistance would help to improve their living conditions. Without his help, I wouldn't have been there ready to take down the building.

"Thank you for your help. I'll make sure things progress quickly until we lay the last brick. You can count on me."

"Much appreciated. We've got a heck of an audience too, so don't let 'em down."

"Yes, sir!"

Suddenly, children came pouring out of the buildings.

"Are the workers here to help us?" I asked.

"I rounded up thirty of them. They're around the corner, waiting for instructions."

"Thank you." That would be plenty for day one. "Serge, Lulunese, do you have the—"

"Used clothes for the children? Yes, I have plenty of them loaded onto my carriage. Plus, I just had them washed."

"The cleaner slimes are loaded onto that carriage. Lilian will ride with the children to show them the ropes, since she's formed a contract with those slimes and all."

"Sounds like we're all set. Thanks again." I'd asked the three maids to provide a full-body bathing service, courtesy of the cleaner slimes. I was going to get the children cleaned up, then give them the secondhand clothes I asked Serge to get ahold of as a sort of compensation for their efforts.

"The weather's getting cold, and here they are about to find new homes. This much wouldn't be too much effort on their parts. Still, I appreciate the thought."

"Likewise... Why don't we get started now, then? I know we're a

little ahead of schedule, but I think everything's ready."

"Yes, I'd say we're safe to start."

There were about fifty children in total gathered at the entrance of the building, with an age range from as young as kindergarten to as old as middle school. The older kids were currently doing a roll call.

"Right, I'll leave the children with Libble, Serge, and the ladies."

"Yes, sir," the girls answered in unison.

"You got it."

"We'll handle it."

And so, Hughes' team and I made doubly sure there was no one left in the building or in the vicinity using both our regular eyesight and detection magic. After confirming all the children were accounted for, we were finally able to get started.

"I'll go round up the workers."

"Oh, Zeph!"

"What is it?"

"Feel free to call over the workers, but don't start the demolition just yet. I was playing around with some of my slimes, and I made a surprising discovery. It's just something I want to try out. It's rather reliable, and if it works, I think it will prove very useful."

"R-Right."

"You really do have a thing for slimes."

"Oh, sorry..." Well, at least I had permission to experiment.

First things first, I made sure that the building was completely empty. While it might have seemed like overkill, you couldn't be too careful when it came to something like demolition. I stepped off the lot, just to be safe, and produced a large pot from the Dimension Home. Now I was ready.

"Hey, are we starting yet or what?"

"What's that kid doing?"

"Whatever it is, he'd better hurry it up."

The workers grumbled to themselves, but it wasn't bothering me. I chuckled to myself. "Well, we've got an audience and all... So I'll give 'em a real show!" If anything, they were fueling my enthusiasm as I poured magic into the pot.

Apparently, some of the workers were magic users, as their murmuring started including magic lingo.

"That should do it." I'd spent about a quarter of my magic, and it seemed to be plenty. The contents of the jar, a pile of sand, rose into the air with a whirlwind.

The crowd muttered in astonishment as the sand flew above the building, and floated in the air as a spinning sphere. At this point, I lowered my right hand that I had raised as the sand ascended; the gesture became a cue for the sand and wind to disperse before

regrouping in midair and flying downward. A sound that resembled crashing waves rang through the area as the sand flew down to the ground in the blink of an eye.

Then...

"Hey, what just happened?"

"Beats me... I just heard a big noise, and then I saw those lines run down the walls."

"Lines? Those are scratches."

"They're pretty deep. Must be pretty powerful to make scratches that deep in stone, huh?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I can see right into the building, and the other side through the cracks."

"What?!"

"I've got beastkin blood in my veins. My eyes don't lie to me."

"So you're saying..."

"He used magic to..."

"Cut up that building?"

"What the hell...?!"

To be more accurate, I didn't cut the building but scraped it away. Just like how mountains become ravines due to years of erosion from wind and rain, I used earth magic to loosen the molecular bonds, using the velocity of the wind and sand to scrape away parts of the earth and stone to change them into sand particles. Plus, the first batch of sand already contained a synchronized sand slime, so I had a few more tricks up my sleeve.

"Let's do this again, and make it a twofer."

The pile of sand on the ground split into two halves and flew up towards the roof. After two lines were struck onto the sides of the building, a space emerged that did not exist before. The sand I was controlling with sand magic had the sand slime integrated into it. It was both sand and a sand slime together, essentially. The sand slime still had its own free will, to an extent, and could still communicate with me because of our familiar contract. Thanks to these criteria, controlling this spell became easy.

It's gonna sound weird when I put it like this... But it feels like I'm able to communicate with the sand itself, and it even acts on its own to do what I want it to.

All this also allowed me to cast a spell which didn't need an incantation, saving me some magic compared to a normal casting. With the skills of the sand slime affecting the sand, there was nothing but upsides to be had with this method.

Controlling the sand with my magic also affected the sand slime.

Just like how elemental slimes evolved from magic, giving the sand slime magic allowed it to learn sand magic itself, as well as the Encroachment skill. The sand magic also allowed it to move faster and gave it a greater range of motion. I could even give it my magic to have it cast a spell in my stead. Of particular note to me, however, was how every time I gave the sand slime magic, its skill seemed to be slightly strengthened. I could compare this to the sand slime acting like a staff to support my spell, and me acting like a magic reservoir to it, so we were each providing what the other lacked. This was based on the hypothesis that the sand slime was using its sand by way of magical energy, and it wasn't like I had used a staff before or anything...

"There!"

After scoring the building vertically at even intervals, I divided each of the two piles of sand into four new groups and began slicing up the walls (though they were more like pillars by now) horizontally. The entirety of the stone-built wall was diced up in less than five minutes, and it all shook the earth as it crashed down, throwing up a dust cloud in the process.

"Bring it in, please. I don't want the dust to reach the crowd."

I gave the sand slime my order and some magic to let it handle the tough part while I maintained the spell's power and range. In response, the sand spread out within the confines of the grounds, turning into a tornado of sand. The dust cloud was immediately sucked into the whirlwind, away from the spectators.

"We've done this much already, so let's wrap it up."

And so, I concentrated the sandstorm into the size of a two-story building. In just a matter of minutes, the sand carved away the rest of the walls and exterior fence, revealing the wooden support. Strangely enough, this spell was less effective at carving wood than stone, but it was possible if I increased the density and speed accordingly. Seeing that some of the wood was completely rotten, I carved it down to chunks large enough to not get blown away by the wind, and dug the ground down to the foundation.

"There! That should do it."

The building had now vanished, replaced by the sight of a large sandpit. Now I could see the people who were standing on the other side of the building. Plus, the demolition had managed to stay completely within the controlled area. Flawless victory!

I turned around to face the crowd. I had met most of them before, and the people I didn't know too well were completely taken aback, while those who knew me better had "you've done it again, Ryoma" smirks on their faces. Everyone couldn't help but look from me to the plot of sand behind me, and back again...

Chapter 7, Episode 13: After Playtime, Part 2

Hughes rushed up to me. “Heck of a show, Ryoma. At least you look like you got some rest... So this is what you take away from a few days of R and R? Oh, you don’t need to explain yourself. Actually, don’t even bother. You never know who could overhear.”

As he said that, he gave a side glance to my four stone-faced bodyguards. “Camil, you’re the magic expert. What’s your take?”

“Well, the scale of the sandstorm is one thing; I felt a great amount of magical energy at the beginning, and there are some advanced spells of that caliber. But reducing that giant building to a pile of dust? That is most certainly abnormal. Not even mentioning how this spell didn’t cause any damage outside of the grounds. It seemed to me like you were adapting and changing the spell dynamically as well. Even if you were casting other spells without an incantation, between all of the things I saw, anyone with a decent knowledge of magic would have immediately seen how difficult that spell was to pull off. I don’t know how you managed to do that, Ryoma, but if I were you, I’d make that your keepsake spell.”

“Keepsake spell? Is that like a spell passed down through family members through inheritance?”

“Something like that. To be exact, a keepsake spell is usually a magical researcher’s *pièce de résistance*, which gets passed down to a select few prodigies in their family. These spells can be uniquely complex. Powerful magic can be an effective weapon; a golden ticket, so to speak. There would no doubt be plenty of people who’d try to uncover your secret. Of course, you wouldn’t want anyone pestering you about it when you’ve done nothing wrong. A lot of magical researchers are rather secluded types, and most of the noteworthy families are nobles. So it’s an unwritten rule of sorts that you shouldn’t ask questions about keepsake magic. It’s mostly a noble thing, but it should still get you out of a hairy situation.”

“I see.”

“If they still won’t back off, come talk to us. You should be fine,” Camil advised.

“Will do.”

“That settles that, then,” Hughes said, changing the subject. “Since Ryoma’s spell took care of the whole demolition, how are we going

about this for next time?"

"Oh, right." There was actually something else I wanted to test, even in light of the big spectacle I'd just put on. "I came up with something when I was playing around during my time off, but I ran out of magical energy, so I didn't get around to it..."

"Go right ahead. You've already made a big enough impression, and besides, I figure we ought to be there if you're going to do it anyway. Safety in numbers and all."

"Right..." I got the go-ahead from the group at Hughes' behest, but they seemed rather reluctant about it.

Anyway, time for the encore! I gave my directions to the sand slime and cast the sand spell again. The mountainous pile of sand began to be picked up by the gust, but instead of making it do complicated maneuvers like before, I simply had it pile up the sand on one corner of the grounds. It almost looked like an enormous hourglass in action; the sand began to form a rectangular pile that looked like a giant slab of tofu.

Some of the spectators sounded surprised, but most of them seemed perplexed because the sand wasn't making any intricate movement. Of course, they couldn't see from the outside, but I could sense every detail of what went on underneath the sand... My vision just came to fruition.

Like an artist unveiling his new masterpiece, I swept the mound of sand away. As the flood of sand vacated the premises and into the empty lot beside it, a two-story building was left in its wake. Cheers of amazement rose out of the crowd. The building covered about a fifth of the grounds, with a large front door that led into an open area and stairs in the back, with hallways on either side connected to bedrooms and bathrooms, forming a relatively simple layout.

Revealing a complete building from beneath the sand proved to be more shocking than the demolition, at least after the relatively uneventful movement of the sand that led to it. The spectators continued to loudly clamor.

"You gotta be kidding me..."

"Talk about an overpowered spell..."

"Isn't that the damndest thing you've ever seen?"

Reversing the demolition process, I connected only the sand molecules that would form the building in the process of piling the sand, rather like a 3D printer. I was able to make more complex structures much more easily when I worked with the sand slime. On my days off, I was building and taking down many models in this manner. All I did differently this time was make the model big enough for people to live in it. I remembered how 3D printing technology was being used on Earth to build some houses, so with enough magical

energy and sand, I was sure I could construct a structure in this manner.

“But I’m still—”

I was interrupted by some of the children who had been watching the process, shouting and jumping in joy.

“Wow!”

“That’s our new house!”

“Last one in’s a rotten egg!”

They made a mad dash for the new construction, as the older children and maids accompanying them were standing there surprised.

“Stop those kids!” I called, which got them to react to the bolting children, but two of the children were too fast—I wondered if they were beastkin.

“Teleport!” I caught them just before they made it into the building!

“Now I got you! Stop!”

The repetition of casting space magic to collect mad salamanders’ carcasses had paid off.

“Leggo!”

“Our new house!”

“I wanna see it!”

“W-Well, it’s still dangerous, so you’ll have to wait.” I kept the children at bay for a few moments longer, before Lible caught up with them first and snatched them up.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

“Aww...”

“I *told* you not to go in until the grown-ups say you can! Construction sites are dangerous!” This silenced the children immediately, as Lible passed them onto a few older children that caught up to him. “Sorry about that.”

“No harm done.”

“If you say so... That’s some potent magic you got, though. You can tear ’em down and build ’em back up however you want.”

“This is just a test run, so to speak; it’s not fully refined yet.” While I was confident in my creation, structures made with sand magic became a sandstone-like material, which was easy to shape but also prone to deteriorate. Because it absorbed more moisture, it could freeze and break in the winter, making it relatively unsuited for exterior walls. Not to mention that this was my first time creating a structure of this size; there could have been some cracks or imperfections, so I thought it warranted an inspection of stability and safety.

“This orphanage needs a more thorough build. That’s why I called

the workers over, after all.”

“Why don’t we check, just in case?”

“What?” I turned to find Zeph, the team I had been talking to earlier, and Arnold.

“We got your back. More than half of the workers here today are familiar with construction. Why don’t you have them inspect the place?”

“Are you sure?”

“Just a slight change in their job description. You’ve built this much already, and think those kids would feel better once they got a stable roof over their heads.”

That made me realize that the kids who bolted might have been anxious about losing their home...

“Say, Lible, I was planning on building a yard for the children to play in. Would a yard as large as this building suffice? We can take it down once the home itself is fully built.”

“We wouldn’t dare ask that much. We just want a place for the kids to be safe. As long as this building’s safe to live in, that’s good enough for us.”

“Understood. In that case, Zeph, could you call over the workers? I’d like them to inspect the building for safety, and if everything’s okay, check the measurements for doors and windows. After that, we’ll build a wall that encircles the grounds.”

“Got it!” Zeph ran off.

“We’ll get back to our jobs, then.”

“Please do. I see we’re attracting a bigger crowd.”

“See you later!”

Hughes, Jill, and Camil scattered to organize the crowd; in their stead approached Arnold, from the clerk’s office.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Master Takebayashi. I had the pleasure of watching you work, although the process was rather different than what I had imagined.”

I returned a weak laugh. I assume he imagined a traditional hammer-and-nail process or a more conservative use of magic. That was exactly what I would have done if I hadn’t noticed the use of the sand slime over my time off...

“I didn’t expect so much to be done in so little time,” Arnold added. “Should we push ahead with organizing the district?”

“Yes. I can’t handle all the sites, so we’ll need the workers to help out, but there’s no need to spend too much time on demolishing existing structures. Since we can start building them sooner, we should have a shorter turnaround. And while I want structures like this one inspected, they won’t fall apart in a matter of days.

Personally, I think they can be used as impromptu evacuation sites or temporary shelters... So why don't we do this with a little more flexibility?"

"No objections here. That's a great idea."

"Please make sure the residents are fine with it, though."

"Of course. With Libble's assistance, I'll try my best to keep all of the residents happy." He looked to Libble with a confident smile.

"As long as the city's coming clean with us, we're not gonna stir up any unwanted conflict. Looks like you got your head on straight, at least. We can help."

"Thank you. I find it fortunate to make an acquaintance of a local leader; it's much easier for me to receive the community's sincere feedback that way."

"Hmph."

"Well, I should be going... I have other business to attend to. If you see me at the Cat's Forehead Cafe again, please talk to me anytime."

"We'll see you around. Oh, and by the way, I heard at the cafe that you're ordering more cakes as takeout. Try and eat a decent meal once in a while, will you?"

"I'll take that under advisement," he chuckled.

"That's a definite 'no' coming from him," Libble remarked, echoing my sentiments.

"No kidding."

Libble left shortly thereafter; he also said something about business that needed taking care of.

Zeph's workers concluded their inspection and reassured me that it was safe to inhabit for at least a short amount of time, although it remained to be seen if the structure would hold up to the climate of this area, and for how many years.

After that, we measured the windows and doors before I delegated the crafting of them to the slimes and the crafting of the parameter walls to the workers using the stones I crafted with magic. With the extra time, I built the foundation for the more substantial orphanage until sundown came to conclude our work for the day.

Chapter 7, Episode 14: End-of-Shift Meeting

After leaving the construction site, I headed back to the shop. I had planned to meet the people who had walked out of the conference, just like I had discussed with Darson and the others, but there was something I had to take care of first.

“Right, let’s get started.”

The seven helpers from the duke’s had gathered at the shop office, where we were going to catch each other up on the day’s progress before Darson and company would arrive. That being said, we were at the construction site that morning, and the only ones who weren’t with me after that were the three maids.

Libiola—the ape beastkin—seemed to have her eye on me. “May I speak for the maids?”

“Please do.”

“After leaving the construction site, we began preparations for acquiring the land, establishing the security company, and hiring new personnel at the Merchant’s Guild for the rest of the morning; there were no problems. We just need Ryoma, Hughes and Jill to sign a few documents later. Also, come tomorrow morning, every guild with a branch in Gimul will hear word of our company’s establishment and recruitment information.”

“Thank you. Guess that settles the paperwork, then.”

“Yes. We were here for the afternoon, and received word from Master Lible that many of the residents who had been holding off on volunteering to move their residence have agreed to do so. The owners of other orphanages who had been unresponsive sent their apologies for a delayed response and enthusiastically agreed to the project.”

“Wonderful!”

The people of the slums had been pretty cooperative to begin with, but some had been hesitant to accept our offer. It was only natural for them to take their time. Moving was an ordeal, and I imagined they feared losing their home in the process, particularly when it came to the orphanages, where children’s livelihoods were at stake. Since they were now enthusiastic about it...

“Chalk it up to my magic show this morning, I suppose.”

“Indeed. I had my suspicions when you began the construction

right after the demolition; no wonder you made such a spectacle of it.”

“I really did want to experiment, but I thought it’d be a good advertisement for how quick the process can be. I was certain we could at least use it for demolition purposes... We’re going to garner attention when we start up several businesses at once. We’d have to deal with some complications because of that, I’m sure, but if I came off as some powerful mage, maybe that will deter some of them from trying to mess with us. Best of all, I have you all to help me.” I smiled in a way that conveyed my trust.

“You could tell us that *before* you try experimenting next time,” Libiola chuckled.

“The next message comes from the manager of the next orphanage in line to be demolished. Apparently, they spoke with the manager of this morning’s orphanage, and the children are moving to the newly constructed temporary housing tonight. The former orphanage is ready to be demolished anytime.”

“They’re moving already? Can the place accommodate those children, however many there are?”

“Just like the former warehouse you’ve demoed this morning, the next one had rotten floors, crumbling walls and ceilings... With much of the building uninhabitable, they were already living packed tight in the confined space. The children are perfectly fine with the space, and even happier that there won’t be any drafts in the new building.”

“If they’re okay with that... Let’s pay out the children for their trouble as soon as tomorrow. It’s great that we can take down the next building, though. We were going to purchase that land to build the security company HQ.”

Hughes jumped in. “Oh? Does that mean we’re getting our home base ahead of schedule?”

“I suppose so. I’ll use sand magic for the demolition and construction.”

Since we had planned to build a proper home for the children, I had only built their temporary housing by constructing the rough shape with sand magic. When it came to the security company, I was going to design more details and waterproof it with sticky slime solution. This would double as an opportunity to observe the short-term effects of waterproof coating or paint on my sand magic buildings.

“Hughes, Jill, Zeph, Camil. I would like you all to collectively come up with the facilities and features the building would need.”

“Got it.”

“The last message of the day is from the duke’s residence, about the recruitment of a trustworthy doctor. A letter has arrived, asking

for four apprentices to accompany the doctor.”

“They’re not canceling? And they’re sending *five* doctors for my benefit?”

“Not exclusively, it seems. The arrangement has been suggested by their mentor, Master Alaflal... I believe you’ve met.”

“The duke’s live-in elf doctor? Yes, I met him briefly when I was staying at the duke’s. He gave me advice on the magic recovery potion for Ox.”

“That must explain it, then. He was quite impressed by your knowledge, Master Ryoma. So much so, in fact, that he suggested this arrangement the moment the duke requested his service. He is eager for his apprentices to venture outside of their comfort zone. He also mentioned that the apprentices have learned enough to start gaining experience in diagnosis and treatment.”

So basically, they’re interns. Who knows what they have to learn by coming to me, but if Alaflal thinks it’ll be a learning experience...

“Well, I see no reason to decline. Better safe than sorry if we have any injuries, at least.”

“I will inform them of your acceptance.”

“Thank you.”

That concluded our meeting for the day...save for one more thing.

“One more question from me. Do you think I could keep a few goblins in the northern mines where I live?”

The seven shared a look before Lulunese spoke. “As long as you form familiar contracts, there shouldn’t be an issue, but this seems rather sudden.”

“It started with my lesson the other day... If someone is going to the trouble to teach me something, I want to spend adequate time on it and give it my best effort. I wanted to start delegating my work to you all so I can have that time to learn. Seeing those workers in action today, I realized that having extra hands on deck for manual labor can be really helpful. For example, it’s not that I don’t enjoy feeding my slimes every day, but it’s been taking up more and more time as I gain new species of slimes.”

Now my point seemed to click with the group.

“How many slimes do you have now, Ryoma? I remember you having at least a few thousand...”

“I thought slimes of the same species could merge together.”

“You’re right, Jill. I just need more than a hundred of the same species. With more and more variety, and me trying to acquire as many slimes as I can, I’d have to do another headcount soon to find out an exact number. The stone and weed slimes are multiplying quite literally by the day, for example.”

I was beginning to feel like a zookeeper. Not that I’d ever worked

as one, but I could certainly see the resemblance.

“Even if you’re passionate about them, it would be more work to take care of them the more you have,” Lulunese said, to the group’s agreement.

“I saw goblin tracks on my way here this morning. Apparently, they sniffed out my potato farm somehow. I’m counting on them showing up again soon. I was thinking, I’d have to deal with them one way or another, so...”

“So you decided to make them your laborers.”

“Lucky goblins. Better that than getting exterminated, I suppose.”

Jill and Hughes took the words right out of my mouth. While I didn’t adore goblins like I did my slimes and limour birds, I didn’t want to hurt them for no reason. If they could do work for me, I’d provide them with food and shelter. No different from how I treated the clever chickens that provided me with eggs.

“Why not hire some help rather than going through the trouble of using goblins?” Lilian asked.

“When researching slimes, sometimes I discover evolutions and abilities that I can’t necessarily tell everyone about, so to maintain confidentiality... Goblins wouldn’t share any sensitive information with anyone else.”

“That makes sense. Sorry for butting in.”

“No, I appreciate the input. I can always be wrong, and I do foresee hiring human help someday.” The variety of my slimes had drastically increased with just one trip, and I could see it exponentially growing depending on how my experiments would turn out. “So, I wanted to hire goblins as labor and to feed cleaner and scavenger slimes.”

The group exchanged a few words before concluding that, despite the hurdles involved, I could handle it myself.

“Right, I’ll capture the goblins the next time I see them.”

“Oh, Ryoma. There’s something I meant to talk to you about.”

“What is it, Hughes?”

“Well, you know that there are nobles involved in how the state of our city is, right?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. I don’t know who they are, though.”

“Then I think I should tell you some more about that... What do you think?”

“If you’re willing to tell me, I’d like to know.”

Hughes and I turned to the remaining six.

“Ryoma is already involved... He’s even volunteered to help us. It’s only fair that we provide him with some information.” With a stern look, Jill went on to give me a detailed explanation. “Not that you’d ever meet them or need to know their names... But we’ve

discovered that Baron Ransor, Baron Reefled, Viscount Fargatton, Viscount Danielton, and Count Sandrick are secretly involved in the matter.”

“Five of them...”

“Correct. However, Baron Ransor has no reason to oppose Master Reinhart or his family. It seems the other four have coerced him into cooperation.”

She went on to explain that the Ransors were a small noble clan ruling a small and unremarkable land. During the reign of the previous baron, he apparently discovered a gold mine in their land and struck it rich in the blink of an eye... The truth, however, had been contested. The baron Ransor at the time had no knowledge of mining or defending mines. He reluctantly sought help from Viscount Fargatton, who wasted no time in ensuring that the mines could not be operated without the other four nobles.

“Baron Ransor appears well off because of the gold mine, he sends copious amounts of money and gifts to the other four nobles under the table. Somehow, he is both the sponsor and the lowest rung, slaving away for the other four.”

“Enemy or not, I rather pity this Baron Ransor character.”

“Don’t worry. Master Reinhart is trying to detach the Ransors from the rest of them. Cutting off their finances. I’ve heard we have plenty of ammunition to execute that plan. While Baron Ransor is partially responsible, Master Reinhart has stated that, since the baron was coerced, he would settle the matter with the Ransors by means of financial restitution. He will even offer to help run the mines instead of those other nobles.”

I see... Reinhart’s ready to take over the position of the other four houses.

“I didn’t mean for the whole Reinhart house to join me.”

With Darson and company approaching, we put a pin in this conversation.

“The Reinharts will make their move during the year-end high society ball. With a loss in their financial resources, they won’t be able to do much. We just have to make it until then.”

A goal. Couldn’t have asked for anything better.

Chapter 7, Episode 15: Improving Relations

Currently, the break room of Bamboo Forest was occupied by fifteen participants who had walked out of the conference, including Darson the armorer and the family from next door; I also invited Jill and Hughes to represent the new security company. I had called this meeting to discuss the current state of Gimul and methods of protecting ourselves, but we hadn't made much progress. Those who I hadn't met personally before were clearly intimidated. Of course, I had only myself to blame; the things I'd said at the conference hadn't been forgotten so easily, it seemed. There wasn't an air of patronizing like last time, but it was still awkward enough to stall the discussion.

In an attempt to clear the air, I proposed using my new security company as an option for protection. I asked Jill to give them the rundown, emphasizing that it wouldn't lead to noble involvement, since that had led to chaos in the sketchy conference. But when Jill was finished, the group seemed more taken aback by the fact that the duke had directly sent his personnel.

Just when I was concerned that the pitch had gone in one of their ears and out the other, Darson spoke up. "Uh, excuse me. Most of you know me already, but I'm Darson. I run an armory. Can I ask you some questions, Ryoma?"

"Of course."

"The first is about this security company itself. I understand now that we don't have to worry about nobles interfering, since that was our concern the other day. I understand that, but are you serious? You gave us four conditions for starting this company—to put those two, being under the duke's employment, in charge; that you foot the bill for all expenses from hiring to maintaining the company; that you only keep the operation going until the city becomes safer; and finally, that you turn over the workforce to the duke after then. It is hardly cheap to hire, train, and arm someone, let alone keep them fed until they're ready to work. That's something you'll need to account for with every new hire. With all that money being spent, you won't have free rein over them while your business is running, and then after that, you have to turn them over to the duke. There is zero benefit in this for you."

"I understand your point, but I'm quite serious about this. With

the exception of putting Hughes and Jill in charge, I brought those conditions to the table to increase our chances of gaining the permit.”

The business owners in the room stared at me, clearly nonplussed. Like they thought I was planning to intentionally lose money on this, or something.

“Let me be clear—I’m not looking to turn a profit through this company. I have my reasons for this, and one particular reason is competition. While they may be overwhelmed now, we do have reliable guards, the Adventurer’s Guild, and even mercenaries people can hire; people who make a living from combat. The security company could easily be seen as a competition to them. That being said, a brand-new private business can’t compete with the long-standing trust and reputation of the guild, as I’m sure you all would agree.”

Many in the group showed their agreement.

“Besides, training staff from scratch isn’t the most efficient way of establishing a self-defense force. It would be cheaper and much more immediate to use the existing guild and mercenaries.”

They seemed to agree with that as well.

“Then why start a security company, you might ask. And I would answer, because I think it’s necessary. No matter the cost, I believe we need to make preparations to protect ourselves and our livelihood. There’s an old saying—penny wise, pound foolish. What’s the use of pinching coins now if it could cost you your livelihood, your employees, your loved ones, or even your life? That’s how I see it, anyway. Besides, I’m already looking to make money on another venture outside of the company proper, though it still does affect my company in a way. Also, I didn’t ask for this to expedite the permit issuance, but the duke has offered me some amount of compensation when I turn over my staff to him.”

That arrangement was like “protection” for my future employees, so to speak. Of course I’d keep them under my payroll while I needed them, but what about after that? It felt irresponsible for me to give them the sack just because I didn’t need them anymore. On the other hand, Reinhart had a much bigger need for security staff than I did—guarding the construction of the new district, for example—so he could assign them work as needed. A guaranteed permanent job would make my applicants feel more secure, and if they were good enough for the duke to hire for the protection of his manor, it would look good on their resumes. With that prospect, I imagined some people would even be eager to apply, which would make the recruitment process much easier for me. After I explained all this, they finally seemed to understand my motives. Then Darson spoke up again.

“I can see you put a lot of thought into this, even when it comes to the finances. Still, you’re the one footing the bill while the business is running, and you’d need income to support that. Since you’re going to run a security business, you’ll be charging for the service, right? How much do you want us to pay you, and what kind of security can you provide our businesses?”

“We’re still working out a fair price, under the advice of veterans from various guilds in the city. We still need to hire and train personnel. During the early stages, they’ll be separated into teams to undergo basic training and patrol the city, which can double as free publicity. During that time, we’ll have the patrols regularly stop by your business locations, just to check on things, as well as deal with any problems. You can also put up signs or posters that advertise this fact to deter potential criminals. I’m considering stationing guards at individual shops, but the price would depend on how many guards are required, their experience and skill, and how many hours they’ll be needed for. When that time comes, I hope to discuss the price and service on a case-by-case basis, depending on your budget. Once again, I have no intention of turning a profit or charging excessively through this venture. That being said, if I set the price too low, that may not go over well with the guild members or mercenaries, no matter how temporary the service may turn out to be—”

“So basically, pricing is to be determined.” Sieg quickly butted in and stopped my rambling.

“Well, we can’t force you to come up with something,” Darson said. “Better that than pulling a random number out of your backside.”

“Thank you.”

I’d said pretty much everything I wanted to say about the security company now. Since no one had any more questions, I moved on to the next item on the agenda—methods of crime prevention that we could do ourselves. Without many ideas coming from the group, I explained the measures I was taking at my shop as examples—increased security, telling employees what to do in case of an emergency, regular active threat and evacuation drills, placing shields inside the store, and stationing weed slimes and stone slimes to act as alarms.

“If we can agree to this today, I would like for us to draw up a safety map of the city.” I figured if everybody gave one hundred percent to this, we’d get very good results.

“May I butt in?”

“Yes, Pauline. Something on your mind?”

“I get the increased security; we were even discussing the new company for it, and it makes sense that you’d want to go over

emergency procedures beforehand. But what are these ‘shields’ you speak of?”

“Oh, let me show you.”

At my word, the three top-class maids held up one of the shields, without me even having to ask.

“We have one here.”

“Shields like this one are stashed under the counter in Bamboo Forest, so employees can quickly get to them when needed.”

I had created them based on the clear, full-body shields used by police on Earth; my recreation of a riot shield was light but durable, created from the hardening solution of sticky slimes. My guards would be there during emergencies, of course, but I wanted to ensure the safety of my other employees.

“This thing’s super light, even for a dainty little lady like me! Here,” Pauline said and passed the shield to her husband, Sieg.

“Wow, it is light.”

“May I?”

“Please.”

The shield was passed around the group, and a few of them expressed interest in keeping them at their shop. The meeting definitely picked up a bit more energy after that.

“What is this safety map you mentioned?”

“A map that highlights dangerous, crime-prone locations in the city. You may think that all of the locals know these spots already, but our city is rapidly changing. For example, can you think of any place in the city that used to be well populated—because of a popular establishment, for example—that has since gone out of business and left the place with little to no traffic?”

“Yes... A few, actually.”

“Me too. There’s definitely a few places that used to be safe, but now...”

“You see? One objective of the safety map is to double-check which locations are currently dangerous. That being said, any grown man or woman could pick up on which areas are no-go zones. We would have to look out for them, of course, but another purpose of the map is to find the dangers hidden in our day-to-day lives.”

“Hidden? How so?”

“Let’s see... Have you ever noticed a large stack of boxes in an alley? Or a shop that has a pile of merchandise or trash out back? Or a carriage that parks in front of an alley regularly? Even if those things are only there during certain times of the day, anyone who knows the right time can use it to their own ends. Someone could hide behind those things, or set fire to them if there’s flammable material in there.”

“Now that you mention it, those sound like breeding grounds for crime.”

“So this map will help us to identify those situations so we can warn people about them, then.”

More and more people from the group were beginning to join in, even the young man from my favorite bookstore, who always seemed so bored behind the counter of his shop.

“Exactly! Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind, I would like for your children to help us draw the map as well. Children see things in a different light. They can even find spaces where grown-ups either can’t hide in, or wouldn’t think of hiding in.” I told them about Nikki and his secret lair as an example.

“If you’re a parent, that’s got to be a terrifying thought. You never know where kids could end up hiding in the city, after all.”

“If a child can hide somewhere, then a child can be *hidden* there as well. Perhaps a box that can be used to transport a child, or a location that can keep a child locked up... Criminals who would knock out and kidnap children can abuse these spaces. In order to keep the children safe, I think the best thing parents can do is to be aware of their routine, and to have their children understand where danger lies in the city so they can be vigilant. Crime may be on the rise, but you can’t keep your children cooped up under your wing all day, and I imagine most children aren’t too keen on listening to grown-ups just telling them what to do.”

The group responded with further agreement.

“You’re right. I always tell them to be home before dark, but they still play in the streets until the sun’s almost set.”

“Same with mine... I appreciate when they run errands for me, but they keep cutting through deserted alleys to save time.”

“At least *your* kids help out with the business. That’s more than can be said for mine...”

This was beginning to turn into a parental commiseration meeting.

“I wasn’t good at listening to my parents when I was a kid myself,” Darson said, which led to a few chuckles and looks exchanged. No one here was a poster child, it seemed.

I tried to weigh in. “So, it seems that kids don’t really listen when you give them orders. I don’t know how many parents would approve of me doing something like this.” A few people in the group laughed at this, some after failed attempts of keeping it in.

“Uh, did I say something strange...?”

“Well, Ryoma, as much as you’re not *wrong*, you’re hardly one to talk,” Hughes answered, much to my confusion.

The other attendees joined in.

“I mean, it *would* make sense that you, being a child, would know how children feel, but...”

“You just don’t act like a child at all. I almost forgot you *are* one.”

With the rest of them sharing this sentiment, the awkwardness in the air melted away...



The meeting proceeded swimmingly, with more questions and suggestions from the group stemming from my ideas. Eventually, we concluded that there wasn’t enough time to hammer out the details, so we agreed on a few basic principles, and promised to discuss things again later.

After seeing most of the group off, I returned to the break room, where I had asked Darson, Pauline, and Sieg to stay behind, and they greeted me kindly.

“Thank you all!” I told them.

“Wait, what for?”

“I think this meeting was a terrific success. Everyone seemed happy about how it went, and they even apologized for the other day on their way out.”

The attendees had apologized for putting me in a situation where I must have felt isolated among unfriendly faces, and acknowledged that my combative response must have come from a resolve not to succumb to the orchestrated feel of the conference. While I stood by what I had said at the conference, I had been strained and had fully expected to make an enemy out of everyone in that room. That’s why I had refused to participate in such a harsh manner.

“I don’t feel like all this effort is being thanked properly, though,” Darson said.

“You’ve been thinking a lot, not just about your own business, but the city as a whole. They understood your true intentions today. That’s all,” Sieg chimed in.

Despite their reassurance, I had felt a divide between me and the group at the start of the meeting, which Darson, Pauline, and Sieg had bridged with their enthusiastic participation. If I was able to convey my intentions this day, it was only because they played mediator for me; without them, the discussion would not have even started.

“It was a bit awkward at the beginning,” Pauline admitted. “But aren’t you forgetting something? Everyone here walked out of that conference too. They must have seen some merit in what you said back then.”

“That’s more because Ryoma was acting like a massive, wounded monster protecting its cub.”

“Is that so...?” I muttered.

“We may have helped out today, but they would have clued into your disposition eventually.”

Didn't that mean they had seen me as some unreasonable hothead back at the conference? While I resolved to learn from my mistakes, I had still succeeded in improving my relationship with some of the small business owners in the city! I was eager to maintain our good relationship, and improve things in due time.

Chapter 7, Episode 16: A Pilgrimage of Groundwork

The next morning, some of the weed slimes sounded the alarm before sunrise, so I hurried to the field where they were stationed and ended up catching four goblins about to ransack the whole thing.

Their limbs having been immobilized with sticky slime solution, the goblins turned their heads to me, trying to intimidate me with their shrieks. I was hoping to contract rather than exterminate... I wondered if giving them some food would calm them down.

I took a handful of mad salamander jerky they had given me on the way out of the village of Sikum from my Item Box and held it up to the mouth of the goblins that were bearing its teeth at me.

The goblin snarled for a beat before realizing the jerky was edible, chomping on the end and skillfully pulling in the whole slice. The other goblins looked like they were jealous, so I did the same with them. Since they seemed calmer after repeating that process for three rounds, I cast the contract spell after the fourth. The magic appeared to have worked, but the goblins seemed too preoccupied with chewing the dried meat in their mouth.

“Are you listening? Can you understand me?”

It looked like the spell was a success, because I could sense their confusion from their sudden understanding of my thoughts. Trying to measure the degree of communication we had, I tried asking them why they had come here.

Want food.

Looked long time.

Much food here.

Take. Eat it all.

It seemed like we could communicate just fine, grammar issues aside. Soon, they realized that they were still bound, and started loudly demanding their freedom. I threatened them a little, which caused them to scramble to flee, realize they were still restrained, and freak out about it. Their rather stupid reaction confirmed that they most likely wouldn't be a threat, so I decided to recruit them, explaining how I owned the farms and was put in charge of managing the land around here...



...but they seemed utterly confused.

"What I'm trying to say is... Here, my territory. Got it?"

It looked like they did.

"Food here, mine. Got it?"

Same with that statement.

"You come to my territory. Steal my food. I kill you. Got it?"

I sensed the collective dread of the goblins, but they must have decided ignoring my question would worsen their fate, somehow, as they vigorously nodded in acknowledgment.

"No stealing yet. Work here, I won't kill you. You work, I provide food, clothing, shelter. Got it?"

I sensed their incredulity, so I simplified it for them. "Your choice: work or die."

Work!

That concluded our negotiations, as I learned that the goblins couldn't comprehend complicated thoughts. With them, it was better to be as concise as possible, articulating each individual thought.

After this, I asked the four goblins if there were any more in their pack, and they told me there were another four. I had them take me to the others, and after a similar series of events, I had contracted a total of eight goblins. It was getting lighter by then, so I gave them food and a section of the mines before having them help with my morning chores. While I planned to renovate their area to make it more comfortable, I remembered how there was once an infestation of goblins at these very mines. They would survive just fine for the time being.



After getting ready for the morning, I headed out to work. This day, we were scheduled to demolish another orphanage and quick-build the security company's headquarters in its place with sand magic.

I started the process, building according to the room specifications from Hughes and company, who met me at the site.

"Hughes, Jill, this drawing only shows the interior layout. What about the exterior?"

"Oh... Sorry, I hadn't thought of that. I only double-checked the rooms we'd need," said Jill.

"Can you take care of it? This is going to be our base of operations, so give it some authority, or something," Hughes suggested. I obliged, designing the exterior to match the first building that came to mind that seemed like it had authority.

"Hey, that's pretty good!"

“Amazing symmetry.”

While its size was smaller than the real thing, since I’d matched it to the grounds of the former orphanage (which used to be a warehouse, incidentally), it was still comparable to the business end of a noble manor. A structure resembling the National Diet Building had now been erected in Gimul. I released the sticky slimes to coat the inside and outside of the building, so I could check this off the list.

“I’m going to pick up the construction of the new orphanage from yesterday. Keep an eye on the stickies for me.”

With Zeph and Camil in tow, we headed to yesterday’s site. We directed and worked with the builders there, spending the morning constructing the first floor. After having lunch with both of them, I headed off to meet someone in a particularly chaotic sector of the slums where huts and temporary housing were strewn nearly on top of each other.

“These parts are...a little worse for wear.”

“You told us we were meeting someone as part of building the trash plant. Who are we seeing today?”

“People call her Grandma Garbage... She’s made her living off trash for decades, and she’s supposed to be the go-to person for anything garbage-related in Gimul. She’s even well known among the children and garbage pickers of the slums.” I answered Zeph and Camil. “The only thing is, she takes a lot of pride in her salvage work and can be a bit much. I met her the other day—”

“Well! If it isn’t the rich kid.” Speak of the devil. Grandma Garbage herself called out to me, holding a large burlap sack on her bent back.

“Oh, hello, Nanna Garbage. On your way home from work?”

“Took a little stroll before our meeting. I’m surprised you wanted to see a weird old lady like me again.”

“Like I was saying the other day, starting a new venture is much easier when I can get advice from those who know the industry well.”

“Those two involved in that project of yours?”

That reminded me that I hadn’t introduced them.

“This is Camil, and this is Zeph. They’re helping me with my work.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Glad to make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise. Just call me Grandma Garbage. Everyone around here does.”

The pair showed a little concern at this. The negative connotation of this nickname seemed off-putting at first, so I understood that sentiment.

“She won’t tell me her name, no matter how many times I ask,” I

explained. “So I just call her Nanna Garbage.”

“I see. Then that’s what we’ll call her too,” said Zeph.

And so, we walked the short distance to her home. What I needed the most when it came to building the trash processing plant was garbage collectors; the plant wouldn’t do much good without people bringing trash to it. But first, I had to contact the people who were already making a living by gathering trash, since any new trash collectors I’d hire would become their direct competition, fighting over a limited resource—the city’s trash. While I considered recruiting the current trash collectors to work for me, there was no guarantee that all of them would oblige, or that their rapid lifestyle change wouldn’t cause some other issues. After all, I’d decided to first target areas that the trash collectors of the slums didn’t get around to and/or had difficulty reaching. I hoped to take on processing trash on a citywide scale, but I thought it best to start by establishing our own territories and keeping out of each other’s way, in order to build trust between my new business and the current roster of trash gatherers.

“Which parts of the city do most trash collectors avoid working in?”

“Let’s see... The artisan district on the west side is off-limits. Some of their work involves chemicals that’d be dangerous to handle without the right knowledge or equipment. The artisans have to dispose of those.”

Industrial waste, then. It seemed like I could take care of them, but I would have to confirm that and set up a safe transportation method for the waste before taking it on.

“Adults stay away from the suburbs on the east side,” Nanna Garbage continued. “Each neighborhood has its committee that collects its own trash. We don’t mess with them. Poor folks like us get dirty looks just from walking down one of their streets. It’s going to make our lives even harder if we scavenge their trash up there. Still, it’s one of the safest spots in the city, so little ones go there pretty often. They only pick off the street, though. We never take from the trash they’ve already collected.”

Interesting...

“Folks around here often go to the south side where there’s a bunch of inns and restaurants. That means a lot of trash. People working those establishments toss their trash in one of the many dumping sites, so we pick it up. Lately, though, we have a bunch of outsiders going right up to those businesses or digging into the little piles of trash they put out by the back door *before* they actually dump them... If they came and asked how we do things around here like you are, I’d teach them a thing or two. But they’re making trouble for all of us.”

It sounded like people of the slums followed their own set of rules that minimized their effect on the city. While I didn't want to overstep, I made a mental note to notify the Merchant's Guild of this later on.

After asking Nanna Garbage a few more questions, I promised to come to see her again and returned to the shop to take care of some paperwork. It helped that I was in Gimul to take care of tasks as they came up, but Carme was working very hard to ease my workload, leaving me with little more than double-checking things and signing papers to do at the shop. To be honest, coming to the shop was like getting a break.

I spent my free time here picking out a few sets of clothes from the stock of thrifted wear we had acquired for the children of the slums and engaging in small talk with whoever came on break.

Evening came soon enough, which meant I could set out on my last task for the day. After changing into my only suit, I rejoined Hughes and Jill en route to a guard station. While there was one adjacent to each of the four city gates (north, south, east, and west) and others in various locations throughout the city, we ended up knocking on the door of the largest station in the city, which could have been considered their headquarters.

We were set to meet the man in charge of the guards within.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said upon entering the room.

"Thank you for seeing us. I know you're terribly busy."

"Oh? You're the one who healed one of my men with magic."

"Yes! I remember seeing you!"

As it turned out, the man was the same guard who had given me the rundown on the current state of Gimul on the day of my return.

"I never would have expected the top man to be on patrol himself."

"We were helplessly short staffed... Where are my manners? I'm Manfred Dameyer, chief of security."

"Thank you, I'm—"

"Ryoma Takebayashi, right?"

"You knew?"

"The man you healed that day did. I've heard you run a laundry shop, which many guards frequent. I *am* surprised that you're the founder of the rumored security company. Two ventures at your age... Well, I suppose that's irrelevant. Pardon me. And today, you wanted to...?"

Of course, it would have been an understatement to say the Gimul's chief of security was busy.

"As you know, I am in the process of establishing a security

company that provides protection as a product. While this company would be temporary by nature, I need to apologize for encroaching upon the duties of the city guards. Furthermore, I hope to cooperate with the guards to protect the residents of our city. While I don't mean to sound brazen, I am asking for your help."

The rise in crime in the city was a serious issue. Personally and professionally, I was unhappy with the current state of Gimul. My solution to that was building the security company, but I was concerned about how the city guards would feel when a new force popped out of nowhere to protect the city.

"No need to apologize," Dameyer said. "As long as your staff protects the city lawfully, without damage to property or innocent citizens, we have no qualms. Especially if it's a registered business through the Merchant's Guild." He smiled. "We do take pride that we have protected the people of Gimul, but nothing more. Like I said, as long as the guild is involved and you don't do anything illegal, no one would have any grounds to object to your venture. The fact that you still took the time to come and apologize shows how much you respect our profession. I promise that I will pass that down to my guards."

"Thank you!"

This was going much smoother than I had expected! Turns out, Dameyer was an honest and kind person. Though I did get that impression during our first meeting as well...

"We understand more than anyone the current dynamic of Gimul, and that our shortcomings have stirred fear in the people. Your new company should aid greatly in easing that fear. Nothing can be gained from any conflict between us. Our top priority is to protect the city and its people, so we will do all in our power to do so. While I can't control each guard's personal feelings about your company, anyone who puts their personal resentment over our duty has lost their pride as a guardian of the city, and has become merely arrogant. While I hope none of my guards have succumbed to that vice, sometimes hope alone isn't enough. I'll keep an eye on them to make sure no one displays their disgruntlement against you or your company."

"Thank you again, really. I will work with my employees to make sure they cooperate with the guards."

Hughes and Jill gave strong affirmations to this as well.

"So, now that we have all but agreed to cooperate, what specific measures did you have in mind?"

"I have two, for starters—collective training and sharing information."

First of all, most of my employees would have to be trained from the ground up, so I thought training with guards could be a nice change of pace on both sides. The idea of sharing information

stemmed from my plan to patrol the city as part of advertising the new company. If the patrol came across any crime, they would have to take action. For my patrol team to deal with the situation as much as they'd be trained to do until the guards arrived, and then transfer detailed information (maybe even criminals they'd arrested) to them, I wanted us to share as much information as possible.

"We just got some new recruits ourselves, so training together can't hurt. The patrolling on your end and us sharing information will help us out a lot."

"We're going to be a private business, so we'd like to cooperate as much as possible, if you let me know what we can do."

"In that case..."

We spent the rest of our time discussing requests from the city guards and working on the details of our cooperation.



I left the guard station after the meeting, and with no other tasks or plans for the day, I decided to stop by the Tamer's Guild.

At night, the guild was almost empty, including the reception. Though they were no doubt nearing closing time, the receptionist beckoned me with a smile.

"Welcome. How can I help you this evening?"

"I'd like as much sprint rabbit meat as you can give. I can transport it with space magic, though; whatever you have will do. Also, I captured some goblins this morning and decided to tame them. Could you tell me anything I need to look out for when keeping goblins?"

"Yes, sir. I shall verify things regarding the sprint rabbit meat." She turned, called for a man who was passing by, and told him to check their inventory before turning back to me. "May I ask the purpose of keeping the goblins?"

"Grunt work, mostly. I manage the abandoned mines up north, so I was hoping to have them help me with farm work and some heavy lifting."

"Firstly, goblins are omnivorous, so they will eat anything you give them. There is nothing they have a particular aversion to, even if the food has become a bit stale. One thing you should be cautious about is overfeeding them."

"Overfeeding?"

"Yes, feeding goblins too much can encourage them to breed."

"A curse and a blessing when it comes to goblins, as I understand."

"With a comfortable environment and enough food, goblins can give birth up to three times a month, so their population can grow

rapidly. Another factor that may be less well known is that overfeeding goblins can lead to increased birth rates of advanced species like the hobgoblin.”

“Ah... That’s why large goblin hordes are dangerous.”

Their large numbers were dangerous enough in itself, but once the horde was large enough to start acquiring food from their surroundings, the negative spiral began; the more advanced species were born, the stronger their horde became.

I’d taken care of fleeing goblins in the large-scale goblin hunt at the mines, but I assumed the higher-ranked adventurers witnessed this spiral in action when they charged into the goblin dwelling.

“Oh? You were in that spring hunt?” asked the receptionist.

“Yes. I’m actually an adventurer by trade.”

“Then I’m sure you’ve seen the effects of it in person... Once again, goblins are incredibly fertile. It isn’t uncommon for us to hear from tamers that their goblin horde had grown too large before they realized, or they couldn’t control the newly born advanced species. If any of your familiars injures someone, both you and the familiar will face prosecution. Please be careful.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

The receptionist couldn’t quite conceal her doubts about my abilities. I had heard that hobgoblins were larger and stronger than normal goblins. I imagined that many tamers were tempted into overfeeding and intentionally breeding hobgoblins for the purpose of taming them, leading to accidents. I would have to assess my abilities and get rid of some goblins if needed... That being said, I still couldn’t see the limit of my contract with them, and once I got the hang of conversation, the goblins seemed much easier to deal with than the clever chickens.

Even though I used a threat of violence at first, the goblins were honest because of their simple thought processes and were much less stressful to talk to. Besides, while it was easy to make the mistake that clever chickens were all bawlk and no bite, they were more formidable than goblins. Of course, thanks to Kohaku working hard to mediate, I was doing just fine with them. Come to think of it, Kohaku put in some incredible work when I wasn’t looking. As much as I wanted to reward him in some way, giving him special treatment would probably get a rise of the clever chickens, causing him more trouble than it was worth...

While I was letting my mind wander about my familiars, the male guild member from earlier passed a slip of paper to the receptionist.

“Thank you for your patience. We can provide up to fifty sprint rabbits.”

“I’ll take fifty, then. No need to break them down either.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll have them prepared right away.”

One after another, they brought out the carcasses of hairless rabbits that resembled naked mole-rats, each as muscular as a bodybuilder, which made them almost too heavy for a child to lift. Despite them being rabbits, there wasn’t a shred of charm about them, as they were more rugged than cute... Of course, some people might have found these sprint rabbits irresistibly adorable.

“Forty-nine... Fifty,” the receptionist counted. “That’s all of them. That will be 1,500 sutes.”

I paid the price, which was very reasonable. That came out to thirty sutes a rabbit, which was about a third of what an average adult lives off of in a day.

“Sprint rabbits multiply even faster than goblins,” she said. “Very useful little critters for a tamer with carnivorous monsters.”

“I can keep the food cost down if they’re this reasonable... Just curious, are they edible for humans? I’ve never seen them at the butcher’s.”

“They’re not poisonous, but I don’t recommend it. Some of the younger tamers who just started have tried them. Everyone has told me the meat is hardly edible, and they can’t even chew through it. It’s too muscular. I’ve even heard of someone dislocating their jaw from trying too hard to chew the meat.”

So, I wasn’t the first one to take notice of the rabbit’s price tag... I hadn’t given up on the idea, though. Throwing the pile of dead sprint rabbits into my Item Box, I thanked the receptionist and left the building.

Now that the goblins had joined my side, I was going to feed them as much sprint rabbit and potatoes (which I had stockpiled back home) as they wanted. I’d have a conversation with them about those advanced species before I started worrying about them.

Chapter 7, Episode 17: The Mass Hiring

One week later.

“Finally, the day has come...”

I gazed out of the top floor of our new security company’s HQ, built in the style of the National Diet Building. Eager day workers were already congregating at the front gate.

Any large project required a lot of preparation. My week had been completely scheduled with laying groundwork and meetings... But today was far from the end of it; in fact, it was only the beginning. I could finally begin my venture!

“Pardon me, Master Ryoma.” Lulunese entered, looking a little frazzled.

“What’s the matter?”

“The team of doctors from the duke’s has arrived. They want you to give them directions.”

It seemed that the medical team had somehow got here earlier than their scheduled arrival that night, or the next day.

“Thank you, I’ll see them now.”

“This way, please.”

She showed me to our newly built meeting room, which was furnished with a respectable set that Serge had picked out. Three young men and two young women awaited me there, and they all rose from the couch as I entered.

“I’m Ryoma Takebayashi. Thank you for coming.”

“Thank you. I am Maflal, son and apprentice to doctor Alaflal. These are my fellow apprentices...”

“Tint Canterri! Nice to meet you!”

“Ector Moncada...”

“Isabelle Rosada.”

“Clarissa Loniarty.”

They all seemed to be in their early twenties appearance-wise, but Maflal was an elf, so I assumed him to be much older than he looked...and he was quite the looker. The other four were all human, so they were likely as old as they appeared. Tint Canterri was the friendly, athletic type, juxtaposed against Ector Moncada, who gave off more of an introverted scholar vibe, which I found to be more relatable. And Isabelle Rosada seemed to be a highly professional

doctor's doctor, while Clarissa Loniarty seemed the gentle nurse type.

"Thank you for providing us with this opportunity to study in the field," Maflal spoke on their behalf.

"No, thank you!" I answered. "I will no doubt learn a great deal from you all. Pleasure to be working with you." After this, some uncomfortable silence followed, and I finally clued into the fact that the doctors seemed very nervous about me.

While I was wondering about the reason for their nervousness, Maflal spoke up. "Master Takebayashi, we have been told that you are the apprentice to the famous sage Meria."

"Oh, that's why... Yes, you could say that."

I pulled my status board for the first time in a while, and showed him my title of Sage's Apprentice; the nervousness among them now seemed to have been substituted with a sort of admiration. I'd been informed these were trustworthy people, and Reinhart must have told them about my title to make things easier for me, since I was even younger than them. However, they were making me a bit uncomfortable with their practically glowing eyes.

"Um, we can drop the formalities if you wouldn't mind," I offered.

"Really?!"

"It would make this easier for me. My grandparents may have been famous, but I can't take any of the credit for them. To me, they were more like adoptive parents than tutors. And as much as I like to talk about how I've learned a lot, I'm still an inexperienced kid. I'm certain you'll be teaching me quite a lot, so please just call me Ryoma."

"Okay, Ryoma! Then you can call me Tint!"

"With pleasure, Tint," I obligingly replied. He definitely knew how to project his voice like an athlete. When I asked the remaining four if they were also fine with being on first-name terms, they all agreed.

"The less nonsense I need to worry about, the better..." Ector muttered.

It seems that elite doctors and their apprentices have a complicated relationship. Probably a fair bit of power struggling going on there.

"That reminds me, since this will be your future office, would you care to take a look around? If anything needs changing, I'll see that it's fixed."

They all enthusiastically agreed to this.

I took them to the hospital in the west wing of the security company's headquarters. On the first floor, there was a reception area, a waiting room, exam rooms, a break room, an operation and prep room, a linen closet, and a pharmacy. The second floor had one bedroom for each of the doctors, as well as a conference room, the nurse station, and beds for patients.

Once I'd given them the grand tour, I asked, "What do you think? I tried to account for everything."

"This is more than adequate. It far exceeded our expectations."

"Most of the potions and herbs I use were in stock... There were even some rare ones."

"Unless it's some sort of novel or rare disease, we should be well equipped to deal with the majority of patients who come our way."

"Only real things we're missing are certain kinds of equipment and the right amount of manpower."

"That depends on how many patients we'll get, and our capacity for hospitalizations."

"For the most part, I'll have you tend to our employees for injuries in training or in the field, as well as for regular checkups. Talking of hospitalizations, I mostly expect those to involve serious injuries sustained in the field... I'm hardly one to talk, since I built this place, but I hope we won't have to hospitalize anyone. I'll just keep an eye on how things go at first, but if time permits, I'm considering making it public knowledge that you're doctors in training under Alaflal here, so I can gauge whether any patients are willing to come in. It wouldn't be sensible to sacrifice the quality of care just to accommodate more patients, so I'll leave that call up to you, Maflal."

"Thank you for such a wonderful opportunity!"

"I'm looking forward to seeing you all in action. If you're ever short on manpower or supplies, please tell me right away. I have permits ready to go, so if you have any ideas on how to improve the hospital, then—"

"Ahem," Lulunese, who had remained quiet this whole time, politely butted in. "Master Ryoma, you are rather strapped for time..."

"Time? Oh, drats!" *I totally forgot!* "Sorry, but I'm actually supposed to be interviewing new job candidates right now."

They smiled, offering to my consolation that they had come too early, only because they had rushed the carriage after seeing heavy rain coming today through Maflal's Forecast skill. I left the five of them with Lulunese, and rushed to the other side of the building that was going to serve as the home base of the security company, where my employees would train and stand by for their shifts. Today, I would be interviewing the applicants I had called for a week prior. But first things first...

"Sorry to keep you waiting!" I entered the room with an apology, being met by Hughes and Jill, Fay and Lilyn from Bamboo Forest, and all the adventurers whom I could trust with training my new employees.

"...And that would be Ryoma," Hughes said to the rest of them.

"Don't worry, we heard you were running late," said Jill.

“We just finished running through the interview process,” Roche said.

“Wanna wrap things up for us, boss?” Howard said.

I had met these two when I volunteered as a tutor for a rookie training session at the Adventurer’s Guild. They were members of the Guiding Light party, now partially retired and focusing on training and supporting the future generation of adventurers. They were also accompanied by the rest of their party—Lucas, Lucy, and Mimir.

“Uh, well, if you’ll allow me to conclude, then... Thank you all for joining me in the venture of my security company.”

“Come on, you’re too stiff. Who do you think we are? This is *our* city, so of course we’re gonna help,” said Jeff, a B-rank adventurer who was born in the slums and had many friends.

“Indeed. Adventurers should give back to their community. Not to mention, this will be a good avenue to improve our craft,” said Asagi, an A-rank adventurer and samurai.

“Monsters become less active during winter, with a few exceptions,” added Leipin, a monster researcher and mage.

“It helps us to get steady work during this season.”

“There are *some* quests out there, but not nearly as much as you’ll find the rest of the year.”

“The unpredictable weather only makes for slippery ground.”

“We’re not strapped enough for money to work constantly, but we do want to stay active. Can’t think of a better job to do in the winter!”

These were the four beastkin beauties—Welanna, Mizelia, Cilia, and Miya.

“They’re right. Everybody’s here ’cos they wanna be. Thanking us now is practically an insult,” said Gordon, a dwarf.

“We were all inspired by you to chip in,” exclaimed Sher, who was young but well respected not only among the guild but by most in the city.

They were all people whom I had come to know since arriving in the city, and they were once again ready to help me out.

“I’m just grateful... When I first came to the city, I never expected I’d be here... Uh, but this isn’t about the crime or anything.”

I took a moment to find my words.

“As most of you know, I used to live as a hermit in the forest until last spring, when I met the lovely people who serve the duke. After certain turns of events, I decided to make this city my base of operations. When I first opened my laundry shop, I was just ready to do something new. I could always close the business and go back to the forest, but I didn’t. I was up for the challenge, even though I didn’t have any attachment to this city. After working as an adventurer, traveling some days and participating in events around the city on

others... I've come to love this place, and the people in it, more than I thought I would. At least, enough so that people actually showed concern for me when I decided I wasn't going to sit back and just accept what happened to this city when I had my back turned. But I can only do so much alone."

I couldn't have laid out all of this groundwork myself. Even if I had forced it through bribery and the influence of my association with Reinhart, I wouldn't have gotten to where I was now without the help of everyone here.

"I can't thank you all enough, but let's not beat around the bush here... Gimul is *our* city, and we're gonna take it back ourselves!"

An enthusiastic cheer rang out from the diverse crowd surrounding me. Our plan had finally gotten off the runway, and was ready to soar.

Chapter 7, Episode 18: Changes in the City and Sher's Conundrum

The next morning, I saw clear change in the streets of Gimul. The main street was bustling as ever, but now, the faces in the crowd seemed to be glowing.

"Hurry, hurry, folks!"

"Best price in the city!"

"Five sutes for each skewer! Don't sleep on this offer, it ain't gonna last!"

Even the calls from the food stands and pop-up shops carried more energy.

After walking down the street for some time, I passed by a certain shop in the alley and overheard a group of ladies chattering away.

"Good morning, ladies."

"My! It's been so long since we've seen each other."

"Yes, I was hesitant to come to this part of town..."

"Right? Especially with all those men from who knows where sleeping on the street."

"I know! It's a shame how they came to the city looking for work and couldn't find any, but we can't have them sleeping on the streets. I wouldn't go near them."

"They weren't around this morning, so I decided to come this way again."

"Me too!"

"I actually haven't seen any of them today; there would always be at least one in the area before... I wonder where they've gone? Not that I want them back on the streets."

I walked past several more groups noticing the same, and even mentioning that the city felt nicer and safer. While the workers didn't have any ill intent, and had no other option than to sleep on the street, a street corner with a congregation of workers sleeping on the ground could carry a different air than a street corner without them, and it could affect passersby differently.

The laborers had moved into the dormitory the previous day. Starting this morning, they should be hard at work at the security company, trash plant, or at the factory I partnered with the Morgan Trading Company to build. Even though they had contributed to the rise in crime in the city, most of them had come to the city simply in

search of a job and not to commit a crime. Of course, people had strengths and weaknesses. There was more than one type of job at the security company, for example. Guards would need stamina and combat prowess, while administrators required more clerical skills. Different departments required different skill sets.

Based on my personal experience in Japan, people struggling to make ends meet can become desperate under the anxiety and pressure of poverty. They sometimes applied for jobs with no regard for their strengths and weaknesses. The interview the day before was my attempt at sorting out the applicants into general groups to try and fit them with a job that best met their talents, rather than selecting a small portion to hire. By the end of the day, we had hired 546 laborers. While we didn't have a good count on the total number of job seekers in the city, we could, hopefully, steer them clear of committing crimes just to put food on the table.

While I was taking in the changes in the city, I had arrived at the headquarters of the security company, where I could overhear the sounds of the new hire training. I was already beginning to feel reassured and invigorated to further this venture.

I entered the medical ward of the headquarters to fulfill my part in getting to know my new doctors better, and for us to enrich each other's learning!



“Ryoma! Tell me more about this ‘serum’ of yours!”

“No, let's hear about the medicine slime first! It's useful enough that it can generate bodily fluids with all sorts of medicinal properties! So many applications, especially in regions without doctors or that have trouble accessing medical supplies!”

“I would like to hear more about the nutritional supplements.”

“Alchemy... Talk about convenient... Simplifying the pharmaceutical process, and it looks like you could even extract new medicinal properties, or even create a whole new type of medicine...”

“As an elven doctor, I thought I knew much about medicine, but it seems there is plenty of unknown territory for me. Very interesting.”

While I was to temporarily be their employer, I was also seeking their tutorage. We established that I would treat Maflal as my teacher and his apprentices and I would treat each other as equals, which I think helped in breaking the ice between us. At the same time, I came to discover how ravenously curious they were. Perhaps this should not have been a surprise knowing that they were sent my way by Reinhart; as soon as I was done explaining a few applications of my slimes and alchemy, as well as my research into supplements, they started chomping at the bit for more information immediately after I

opened the floor for questions. Three out of the five had uttered those questions, eager to address their topic of interest first, while the fourth listened with a smile and the fifth began pondering on their own.

I did feel a sense of camaraderie with them, but I was lost at how to handle this situation... When I noticed it was already noon.

“Uh... Can we take a break first? It’s close to lunchtime.”

“Yes,” Doctor Maflal agreed. “Best that we get our thoughts in order over lunch.”

His four apprentices also concurred, and we headed to the dining hall...

“It’s packed...” I noted, seeing the inaugural class of 120 guards nearly fill the hall. There were some open seats, but I was scouting for six seats together, when...

“Ryoma!”

“Huh? Oh, Sher!”

He was waving to me and pointing at the seat adjacent to his. It looked like a party had just vacated his table, and he was now saving those seats for the six of us.

“I think we have our seats.” I gratefully waved to Sher, then approached the counter to order our food.

“We can choose from a menu here?” One of the doctors asked.

“Food is what we need to survive, after all. We picked out workers who had experience cooking or working at restaurants to lead the kitchen,” I said.

The food was free to employees, of course. This day, the kitchen offered a sandwich or a plate of bread, sausage, and vegetable soup. It was understandable that they could only offer two options, considering how many ingredients they had to prepare... And it was our first day of operations. I’d let the dining hall staff run for a while and see how it went.

I took the platter since I wanted to taste the soup, and the doctors picked their preferred option before heading to the table where Sher was sitting.

“Thank you, Sher.”

“Don’t worry about it, Ryoma. And they are...?”

He would naturally be curious. I had no reason to lie about who they were, so I introduced the doctors to Sher before introducing him to them.

“Sher is very well respected in the city, and a talented adventurer, trusted by the guild.”

“C-Come on, Ryoma. Don’t oversell me like that.”

Despite his humility, I valued Sher’s talent and considered him a genuinely nice kid. It felt strange thinking this when I was technically younger than him, but he was mature beyond his age.

“You’re a much more talented adventurer than me,” he added. “It’s hardly been a year since you registered, and you’ve already caught up to my rank.”

Indeed, we were both D-rank now, but his comment wasn’t made out of frustration or jealousy; Sher had always accepted me, and I was grateful and appreciative of that.

Back when I volunteered as a trainer of new recruits at the Adventurer’s Guild, the looks I got from others were not necessarily friendly. Some adventurers quite blatantly began to avoid me after I participated in a sparring session; not that I could blame them. As much as adventurers adhered to the merit system, it could not have been pleasant to be overtaken by someone younger or someone with less experience.

To simply accept that change in dynamic, and continue to work hard without giving up... While probably morally correct, the fact was, humans were emotional creatures. Not everyone could easily accept their reality, including the attendance of the guild’s training session. Back on Earth, I could remember several times when people surpassed me at work, and I had met countless people who were better than me at something. Of course, I struggled to accept some of those instances.

I shared this sentiment with Sher, omitting certain details, and he scratched his cheek. “It’s kind of embarrassing when you put it that way... I’m not very talented, so I can only put in the effort. I get jealous of people too, you know. If anything, I’m surprised you ever felt inferior to or jealous of anyone, Ryoma. You’re strong, smart, and know so many things.”

This made me wonder how exactly Sher perceived me...

“I think I can compete with most when it comes to stamina or combat, but I was average or below that with everything else, especially social skills.” I had only gotten to where I was after struggling in life for almost forty years. Of course, I couldn’t expect him to know that from seeing me now.

“Besides, being knowledgeable isn’t the same thing as being wise. Knowledge is a tool, and being wise means using that tool well.” There were plenty of people smarter than me in that way without having to look far, and my education through college was paid for. On top of that, I felt like I had experienced a bigger variety of things, for better or worse, and had knowledgeable people around me who I could learn from, not to mention the mighty internet. All things considered, “I was lucky, when it came to my environment.”

“Really...? I’m sure there’s more I can do,” Sher said.

With how much respect he had earned from the guild and the people of the city, I’d thought that he was already doing pretty good...

But there was nothing wrong with his enthusiasm, I supposed. I would always support him, for one.

“What would you say is your weakness, Sher?” I asked. From what I had seen so far, he seemed the balanced type that handled most things with ease.

“Hm... It’s kind of hard for me to gain muscle, so I’m not confident in simple strength. The guild master told me to work on technique over physical strength as well.”

He went on to explain that he had earned his reputation by going around town taking on the more menial quests through the guild when he first became an adventurer in order to make ends meet, and to gain stamina, when he had neither strength nor technique. It seems his jack-of-all-trades style was built on hard work. At the same time, inspiration struck.

I might be able to help Sher out.

“I don’t mean to pry, but what kind of exercises do you do?” I asked. “Like, well, you wouldn’t have protein here...”

No one had mentioned it in this world, and not even the five doctors had heard of it.

“What is this ‘protein’ you speak of? It sounds like some sort of medicine that strengthens your muscles, from the sound of it.”

Contrary to Sher’s—and probably most people’s—impression, powdered protein was composed of the same materials that make up not only muscle, but organs, hair, and nails as well; it was the same material found in many natural foods.

“Is protein a form of supplement, then?” said Clarissa, who had been interested in the supplements I was researching.

“That’s a good way to put it. Protein is an important nutrient in both building muscle and staying healthy. That’s why, not only maintaining but building muscle requires a considerable amount of protein. If you try to take in that amount of protein from food, meat, for example, you would consume a lot of unwanted substances like fat, not to mention fill you up, which would make it more difficult to consume that protein. Protein powder or supplements are isolated forms of the nutrient.”

“No fluff, just the stuff you need. It’s like packing for a long journey.” Sher gave this analogy fitting of an adventurer.

I further explained that the effect of protein can be enhanced by taking it at the right time and combining them with more efficient training.

“That’s incredible... Are you sure you want to tell me that?” Sher asked.

Sher helped me out with my work, and this was a bit of information that would help me train the guards. More ideas came to

mind as we discussed, like using healing magic to aid in muscle recovery. If Sher was willing to volunteer as a test subject, that was great for me since I didn't want to build too much muscle on my young body. When I offered this, Sher silently outstretched his right hand. I immediately took it, and we shared a firm handshake.

"Can I join you in that research?!" asked Tint, the athletic doctor. Great news for me, but I saw a flicker of passion in his eyes. "When I was younger, I didn't want to be a doctor, but rather a knight in service of the royal family... That was a path I could no longer pursue after I injured myself when I fell from my horse during training. I chose to study medicine in hopes of preventing others from losing their dreams due to an injury or illness. While building muscle isn't the same as healing injuries, I'm very interested in the process!"

His background might have explained his energetic demeanor and voice. Plus, he was the one who was the most interested in serums.

"I see no reason to refuse; I would love to have you on board."

"Thank you!"

Over lunch, I had managed to gain a new subject of research and two allies for it. However...

"We have quite the audience now, you two," Doctor Maflal informed me.

Naturally, as we were in the dining hall, we were the focus of many gazes, seemingly wondering what we could possibly be so excited about.



Chapter 7, Episode 19: The Trash Processing Plant and Wist's First Crush

The next morning, I wanted to check on the operation of the trash plant and the factory, plus the slimes I had placed out there. In particular, I expected to see some of the scavenger slimes ready to split; I'd have to collect and contract the new slimes.

When I arrived at the plant, I was met with a good number of employees bringing in the trash and a familiar face watching the process.

"Good morning, Taylor."

"Oh, morning, Ryoma."

"What brings you out here?"

"I had some downtime, so I strolled over here to check on everyone."

"Right... It was you who introduced us to the drivers, after all."

In addition to the trash collectors on foot, we were using horse- and monster-drawn carriages to efficiently collect trash from all corners of the expansive city. When we were preparing to open the plant, I had Taylor give me the names of tamers who could handle monster-drawn carriages. Apparently, he was currently in a tight spot because tamers had been flooding the guild, just as the laborers had flooded the streets.

With Gimul's ample mines, there were always enough jobs to transport miners and mined goods to and from the mines. Still, the large influx of tamers had created an excess of supply, and many of the new tamers were lured into the trade by sweet talk like how the Jamils invented taming magic, so they use plenty of tamers in their land, or how taming magic would help make them qualified for more jobs, and so on. Once they learned the most basic taming magic spell, Contract Familiar, they were practically tossed out of their hometowns with the advice that the Tamer's Guild would take care of them once they made it to Gimul.

In pithy terms, many of them were just like the day laborers—only having learned taming magic as a means to an end with no experience or aspirations to be tamers. I could only imagine the hassle of having to deal with a huge influx of rookie tamers. In fact, there had been a lot of accidents reported lately where the tamer treated their familiar badly enough that the creature defied orders, or even

went on a rampage that would have harmed not only the tamer but those around them, if it hadn't been for Taylor's thoughtful preparations. He had managed to minimize the damage of each incident, where the worst of them only left the tamer injured. This was how the incidents had avoided being the topic of the town gossip. But large or small, any accident caused by a member of the guild was their responsibility to mop up afterwards.

I'm not expecting them to have pride and devotion for a career of taming, he had vented to me during our meeting the other day. *I just want them to understand how much responsibility is needed when dealing with monsters...*

I felt for my dear branch manager. Many of the rookies had been assigned to the mines away from the city, to mitigate the risk of the worst-case scenario where they'd cause an accident that would damage buildings in the city, or even harm passersby. I had swept in and hired the veteran drivers who were left without any work.

When yet another trash collection carriage passed in front of us, the driver gave us a friendly wave. Since Taylor apparently knew the man, he returned a smile back. "I've noticed something from standing here," he noted. "All of that trash doesn't smell too bad."

"I paid special attention to that, since we were building the plant in the middle of the city."

Even though this was formerly the location of the slums, it didn't hurt to be careful about the smell. Besides, workers who take care of the essential job of picking up and carrying trash were treated with a certain sense of disregard. I had put every idea I had about deodorizing the place to use, in order to make the plant seem as sanitary as possible.

"All carriages are covered to keep the trash out of sight and, as much as possible, out of smell. Every barrel, bag, and cargo hold in the carriages used to transport garbage are thoroughly lathered with the secretion of a deodorant slime. Workers are mandated to wear their issued uniforms, in accordance with a dress code. They are also given the same deodorant we sell at Bamboo Forest, with instructions to use it after their shift before being in contact with anyone outside the plant."

"You mentioned that before... That's all it takes to keep the smell in?"

On top of that, the plant before us was an unpretentious rectangular box, the first floor of which was dedicated to gathering and processing trash. Transport carriages drove into the plant through the large loading doors, unloaded their cargo, then drove through the opening on the other side to get right back to collecting more trash. The openings and windows of the plant were fitted with a one-way

wind barrier that allowed fresh air in, but prevented the stench from escaping. Venting was done with wind magical items that incorporated a dust and odor-eliminating filter, fashioned from deodorant and filter slimes, to keep our emissions as clean as possible.

“All these magical items, just to eliminate the smell?”

“I know an excellent manufacturer.”

“Glad to hear it. Never take your acquaintances for granted, as they say... Anyway, I should be going. It looks like everything’s going smoothly; everyone’s working hard and the conditions are adequate.”

“I’ll walk you there, then.”

With the addition of the trash plant and the employee’s dorm, visibility and safety had increased in the area, but it still hadn’t been too long since these streets were slum territory. I thought it might have been worth the extra caution for the branch manager, especially at his age.

“Oh, I’ll be fine. I didn’t just fall into my position at the Tamer’s Guild, you know.” He tapped the breast pocket of his jacket, and a minuscule, hamster-like creature poked its head out from it.

“Well, isn’t that cute.”

“He’s my familiar, Felnark. Resonance moles like him have acute awareness and perception, and they can communicate with others of the same species even when separated. He’ll let me know, along with the resonance moles back at the guild, if anyone dangerous is coming my way.”

“So he’s not just for show, then. Pretty impressive.”

“He may be small, but he’s a good companion. And if push comes to shove, I have another ace up my sleeve. Don’t worry about me; I’ll be taking the road you built anyway. After all, it’s you who’s here to work, not me, right? If you’re that concerned about me, channel that concern into the project. I’ll reap the rewards in the long run.”

I had paved the roads surrounding the plant to make it easier for carriages to come and go, and they quickly led out to the main roads. Not to mention that those carriages passed by pretty frequently, and I did have slimes on guard...

“Well, if you insist,” I relented. “I’ll get to work. Please be careful.”

“You too. Once things calm down, you can join me in a cup of tea anytime.”

I parted with the branch manager and entered the plant. Inside, the piles of trash were being raked apart by the workers who continuously spread them out on the grated floor. This broke down the trash, and sifted them as they made their way to the scavenger slimes in the basement. Pieces of trash too large for the grates in the floor are sent off to a department that breaks them down and sends

them back to the sifting floor. I had designed the plant this way to ensure the safety of the scavenger slimes and the efficiency of their work.

Just like with all slimes, scavenger slimes were most effective when they could completely engulf their target. Additionally, the process was easier when the object they were taking in was softer in texture.

“Looks like smooth sailing all around,” I noted. While I was looking for Zeph and Camil, whom I had left in charge of the plant, I spotted a familiar face working on the floor.

“Wist?”

When I started this venture, I reached out to my fellow adventurer Beck, and Gazelle, who I had met through the training session. After speaking to Nanna Garbage, I decided I wanted people familiar with the lay of the land, at least during our startup phase. They had both told me they were from the slums and had been working as trash collectors until recently. Beck had told me Wist would be joining, but I hadn’t seen him until now... He had grown a year or two’s worth since I last saw him.

“Good morning,” I called quietly, trying to stay out of the way.

“Oh, Ryoma. Good morning,” Wist answered. His voice was a little lower than I recalled.

“It really is you.”

“Y-Yeah. Can’t you tell...?”

“Of course. Just took me a second, since you’ve grown up so fast.”

“I-I only just started getting bigger. Now I have to buy all new armor; everyone else just needs theirs adjusted.”

In spite of that knock on his finances, the way he was growing meant he was closer to adulthood, i.e., it was about time to consider expanding his horizons when it came to work. His position at the plant would provide him with a steady salary, so I was sure he’d put in good work.

“Do you know where Zeph and Camil are?”

“Th-The office upstairs, I think. Grandma Garbage just came in, uh, s-so, they showed her up there.”

“Thanks. Sorry to bother you during work.”

I started heading upstairs.

“R-Ryoma!”

“What’s up?”

“U-Uh, um, well...” Wist struggled to find his words, looking more nervous than usual. My curiosity was piqued, but I let him take a few deep breaths before asking him again.

“Um, you know that...p-pretty maid at your place, Ryoma?”

“Oh.”

If the question didn't make it obvious enough what he was feeling, his bright-red cheeks certainly did. Wist might have been timid, but he was still going through puberty. He must have seen her during the mass interview the other day, when I had him, Beck, and Gazelle attend as a formality. The maids were in charge of the front of house during the interview.

"I-I was wondering if you could...tell me her n-name..."

Her name? This kid's way too pure!

Of course, the issue here was that he could have meant any of the three maids; I decided to ask for a physical description.

"W-Well, she's got a...*gorgeous* physique." Wist blushed even harder.

While I didn't want to embarrass him any further, that didn't really narrow it down. Both Lilian and Lulunese both had attractive figures... Of course, Lulunese was married, so I only hoped that the poor kid wasn't talking about her so he wouldn't end up brokenhearted.

"Sh-She's the one who's like, super ripped!"

Ripped?

"Would you be talking about Liviola?"

"Oh, is that her name? You know, the ape beastkin."

"That's her. I guess that checks out, since you're an ape beastkin yourself."

Ape beastkin were all large and muscular; the term "washboard abs" would probably sell them a bit short. Plus Liviola was more muscular than most men of other species, so I supposed her body could be called gorgeous in the same way you could call a bodybuilder "gorgeous." I felt a pang of guilt when I realized that I had automatically excluded Liviola from his potential choices; in order to prevent the possibility of really hating myself in the morning, I told Wist a few qualities I admired about Liviola and then exited stage left.

Chapter 7, Episode 20: One Fateful Night

There stood a bar in Gimul where passersby could see people walking through the door despite the “closed” sign that hung on it. Tonight, nine men had entered the bar in total. They had arrived in groups of three, one man from each group taking a seat at the table in the center, and the other two each taking up a table behind their group’s representative. The tension in the bar was thick enough to cut with a knife, and nowhere was this more evident than at the table in the center.

“You got some serious explaining to do, Wanz...”

“Go on, then. Let’s hear you smooth-talk yourself outta this one.”

“I’m not sure what there is to explain... I will admit we haven’t made as much progress as I had hoped for. But can the same not also be said of yourselves?”

One man at the center table was Wanz, the host of the tumultuous conference Ryoma had walked out of.

“You wot?!” Another representative shouted at the remark.

As the men readied themselves for a situation, the third occupant of the center table frustratedly clicked his tongue and spoke up.

“That’s enough. Causing a scene won’t do nobody no favors here.”

“He speaks the truth! All was going well on my end until I started the Gimul Union of Small Businesses and assembled every merchant I could—”

“Key word bein’ *was*, eh? Go on, then,” snarled the man.

“Yes. All *was* going well, until *he* showed up. I thought everything ahead. I had plants in the audience. I had ’em all dancing to my tune, and then that little brat went and ruined everything...!”

Wanz’s words dripped with contempt, but that contempt wasn’t easily spotted on his face.

“I almost thought he was takin’ the piss. He sure wasn’t born yesterday.”

“The name Ryoma Takebayashi isn’t known for nothing. That punk’s been putting us through the wringer. Here I went out of my way to have my mooks pretend to be job hunters starting fights around town to try and make his workers look bad...”

“Nothin’ we ain’t been through ourselves. We’ve been pushing for the poor to turn to crime, just so they can hope that kid’ll hire them

en masse... But he's already taken on hundreds, and I hear there's more openings coming. How loaded is he, anyway? Should we just stop running and open our own damn laundry shop?"

Wanz chuckled. "I doubt his laundry business is all that profitable. He's offering all the new hires housing, food, and even medical treatment, in addition to a regular salary. As well as he has done for himself with his little venture, it's highly unlikely that the revenue covers the cost of his new venture. And we can't be the only ones who've noticed that. Rumor has it, the little bastard has a huge inheritance from his grandparents that's paying his bills. I, for one, think it's rather too convenient; he couldn't have been hiding something like that all along. Even if he did have an inheritance, why throw it all away like this? He's either a living saint, or too dumb to understand the worth of money. Since it's readily apparent he's screwing up our plans, I think it's safe to assume that he's in the pocket of the duke. That little...*brat* is just a distraction. Perhaps he is clever enough for his age to play the puppet."

Wanz seemed to regain his composure as he finished speaking; it showed in the softening of his language.

"It'd make a lot more sense than the kid orchestrating the whole situation on his own. He's got some of the duke's staff in his inner circle... So what now? The security company's going to start patrolling the city, apparently. That'd make things hard for the 'thieves.'"

"It's difficult enough already... That company spread some awareness through the guild, topped off with info on some of our sweet spots and tactics. Looks like they got someone who knows our business."

"Same here. Some of the abandoned buildings in the slums we'd been eyeing as potential hideouts and spots for deals have been taken down. What's worse, the 'rezoning' gives the slums more ventilation."

"So the 'acquisitioners' are suffocating too, then. What about the 'grifters'? Do they have enough intel? If we know the time and route of the patrols, we can go after specific shops or ambush the patrol, and that'd also give the 'acquisitioners' a break. That was the deal, wasn't it?"

"Unfortunately, we haven't rooked enough people yet. Some at the conference have grown skeptical of us, so we're pulling teeth with every negotiation. We need to take our time and regain their trust."

Silence filled the room for some time before Wanz spoke again.

"Let us stay the course for now. So what if he has a noble's support? We do too. We can still anticipate a steady stream of job hunters; there's no shortage of jobless yokels in this town."

"No turning back now... We've accepted a quest, after all. Abandoning a quest is a death sentence for creatures of the

underground like us. Even if we were to get away with our lives, we would never find peace.”

“He’s right. Things may be tougher now, but the game’s not over yet.”

Urgency was written all over the faces of everyone present.



Meanwhile, in a room of the security company’s headquarters where most employees had retreated to the dorms for the night, a congregation had formed. Present were the four guards and three maids from the duke’s, as well as Maflal, the doctor, and Serge, who had happened to stop by this evening.

“Well done today, everyone! Let’s drink to that!”

“Cheers!”

As the attendees of the gathering raised their glasses in a toast, Jill asked Hughes with a stern expression, “Are you sure you want to make the report here?”

“Lighten up, Jill. There haven’t been any issues we didn’t anticipate; it’s just a once-over. We can do that over drinks. Besides, we can’t really get all neurotic about it after we told Ryoma to loosen up a bit, can we?”

“You have a point...”

“Besides, you’re putting Serge on the spot.”

“Oh, pardon me... Wait, you pulled Serge in here in the first place! I apologize for Hughes’s behavior.”

“No need. Hughes invited me in so my trip wouldn’t be for naught.”

“I appreciate that.”

Then, Camil spoke up. “Why did you make the trip here, Serge?”

“I have a package for Ryoma from a magical item maker I frequent. I accepted the errand, since I wanted to have a quick chat about the factory’s production with him...”

“They just missed each other. You know how Ryoma’s been going home pretty early lately, right?”

“He has, ever since he started keeping goblins.”

“Makes sense, since he contracted them as familiars. Master Ryoma must need time to get to know the goblins. And I understand that any familiar, even a goblin, can become more aggressive or fall ill while they’re acclimating to their new environment.”

“Whatever makes Ryoma go home earlier is fine by me. He’s nothing if not prone to overdoing things.”

The party collectively expressed their agreement. With the ice of the night broken, Lilian spoke up. “Master Serge? Is there something wrong at the factory that you wanted to speak to Master Ryoma

about? If it's an urgent matter, I'll send my familiar to deliver the message."

"I appreciate the offer. It's not particularly urgent, so that won't be necessary. I was only hoping to discuss some details about the plan of production and products to focus on moving forward, as well as some merchandise Master Ryoma has ordered from me."

"As long as it's not an emergency. I thought the factory was focusing on waterproof fabric; do you have plans for anything new?"

"Yes, the factory will mostly produce the fabric waterproofed by sticky slime secretion. However, he has spoken to me about a separate line of merchandise using slimes... Not to change the subject, but I assume everyone has heard that part of my store was burned down." The group confirmed this. "It seems that Master Ryoma was greatly concerned about the incident. He had so many ideas to share, from how to prevent fires, equipment to extinguish fires in case they happened, how to rescue people from burning buildings, and even special equipment for the rescuers... Come to think of it, it was as if he had come up with them all on the spot. Every single suggestion was worth great consideration, so I want to prototype all of them, and put them on shelves if they turn out well."

"Now that you mention it, Ryoma suggested rescue training in the future, once we're done with basic training... And to train volunteers in first aid."

"Perhaps the burning of Serge's shop had a great impact on him."

"He has always been a caring boy, striving for solutions to help others. That's why I feel like I got to help him out," Zeph said, much to the agreement of the group.

Hughes crooked his neck in contemplation, garnering the attention of the others.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, Lulunese... It just occurred to me how well Ryoma's getting along in this city."

"Yes. That's how he's planned and executed these ventures with the help of not only us but many others in the city."

"Right? And Ryoma has a lot of friends. Wouldn't you agree, Jill?"

"His adventurer friends helping with the security company, three guild masters, top of the city council, the leader of the slums, a merchant like Serge... He has them all."

"He knows a lot of people in the city as well. There are some business owners he made friends with recently, and I've heard older kids from the slums that know him work in the trash plant. Plus he goes to church often and donates good money."

"I haven't known him as long as many of you here, but I still see how much attention he pays to the little things. Sometimes he does

have a unique perspective, almost like his thought process is totally different from other people.”

“I’ll buy *that* for a sute...” Hughes agreed with Liviola, and contemplated some more.

Jill spoke up, with a faint shade of concern on her expression. “What are you going about? You never think about anything this much. Are you sick?”

“Just introspective, I guess. Or maybe just surprised. He’s changed a lot since we first met him. Remember how he used to live in the forest?”

“That’s right. I almost forgot, seeing him fit so well into the city.”

“I know, right? Back to how he’s made a lot of friends in the city, I don’t know how to put this, he’s just getting along so well... He always said he wasn’t a ‘people person,’ but I’m starting to doubt that.”

Maflal chimed in, after having largely remained silent during the discussion. “I definitely think he’s a people person. He made sure we were all as comfortable as we could be when we arrived. Before the security business even opened, I heard he assigned tasks to everyone without hesitation and spent all of his free time laying the groundwork for his venture.”

They each thought about what had been going on lately.

“We’ve been too busy for me to pay it too much mind, but he took the initiative and did all of that himself.”

“Hm... Can’t really say he’s not a people person, can we?”

“Well, that’s the thing; he still thinks he isn’t one. He always did have low self-esteem, so maybe he’s just overestimating his own faults.”

“Wait... I think I get it now. Serge has a point. Ryoma tends to do a lot of things on his own, but it’s not like he *can’t* rely on other people.” Hughes knocked back his glass in relief, looking as happy as a clam.





Meanwhile, in the divine realm...

"All seems to be well."

"Yep. Those working from Gimul's shadows haven't given up yet, but Ryoma has friends in high places. Plus, the city's gotten more peaceful now."

"I wonder what he's up to now?"

"He just finished preparing food for his newly contracted goblins and slimes, and started cooking his own dinner...while experimenting with nonperishable foods."

"B'y's also started ta study farmin', like I dun told 'im to. Still learnin' the basics fer now, but he's growin' better crops already."

"And he's even dabbled in a little mixology. Looks like he's working on growing ingredients for that drink popular in Gimul and testing recipes out. I'm sure having those goblins motivated him to take this on, but I'm just glad he's in the mines. It'd take some work, but there's certainly worse places to try and age a drink. Knowing Ryoma, he might actually be able to pull this off."

There stood six gods watching Ryoma, his friends, and the city at large, holding their drink of choice and leisurely exchanging information they had gained about the world below.

Then, two more gods materialized out of thin air.

"How's it going?"

"Kiriluel. All taken care of?"

"Far from it. But given the state of him now, I say he could use a bit of a *break*!" Kiriluel threw the other god, whom she had been carrying on her shoulder, down on the ground. Serelipta groaned in pain, but his body remained motionless.

"Y-You could have let me down more gently..." Serelipta squeaked.

"I think *not*. You haven't even served your full punishment yet. I'm only doing this because I don't want to kick someone when they're down, but you ought to be grateful for any breaks you get."

Kiriluel's gaze focused on the gods. "Wait, where's Fernobelias? She didn't show up at her shift about this."

"Oh? Did she go AWOL on us?"

"She went home, actually."

"Huh? What for?"

"Ryoma started combining slimes and magic, which was a really good match. So much so that it produced some amazing effects, like he found a loophole in the design."

"She said she'd look into it and then, poof! Gone."

“Magic is her forte, I suppose. And you know she’s got a perfectionist slant.”

“Huh... Well, whatever. How are things here?”

“All clear. Serelipta hasn’t done anything to influence events in the human realm.”

“Oh, come on, you seriously thought I did *that*?”

“Seeing how you gave Ryoma a little prophecy, we needed to make sure you didn’t pull any tricks.”

“Hey, even I wouldn’t go *that* far... I just told him what I thought would happen after seeing how things were in the city.”

“If only your past record didn’t make you so untrustworthy.”

“Yeah, yeah, excuse me, princess... How is Ryoma, anyway?”

“Hm... I suppose there’s no harm in showing you. Here.” Gain held his hand up to Serelipta’s head.

“Ah... I had a feeling something like this might happen,” Serelipta said, still sprawled on the ground.

“Did you, now? Is that down to you pulling a few strings?”

“Even if I hadn’t told him anything, I had a hunch about it... Things were already getting hotter in the city, so of course he’d find out as soon as he got back, especially with what happened to Serge’s shop. And for the record, it was Serge who told Ryoma about foreign nobles lurking in the shadows, not me. My hands are clean.”

“Fair enough...”

“It’s not rocket science; of course he’d take action over all that. Screwing around with a city just to sully the name of a noble would practically amount to a declaration of war. It looks like Reinhart wants to avoid violent conflict as much as possible, and only we know what will come of it for sure, unless we use our powers. Ryoma can’t see the future; all he can do is prepare for the worst-case scenario, so the only difference he’ll ever notice is how quickly he’ll be able to react in the event things go south... Of course, saving precious time in a dire situation may prove very valuable.”

“That uppity-puppy tone of yours is why we don’t believe you.”

“Wilieris, dear. You really should try using that dormant organ inside your head from time to time.”

“Stop it, both of you!”

“I swear, every time we put you two in the same room... Leave it to Serelipta to cause a scene literally without even moving a muscle...”

“Can we get this discussion back on track now?”

Kiriluel, the goddess of war, took the initiative. “Ryoma’s making all sorts of preparations... You could say he’s gearing up for war. Like that thing just said, what’s going on could lead to a war between nobles. No matter what Reinhart wants, violent confrontations are sometimes unavoidable. If it gets to that point, the soldiers at the

security company would add to the duke's forces, his preserved food used to feed his fighters, and even his medical knowledge and technology will serve them well on the battlefield. Not that Ryoma would ever force his employees to serve in a war, and they wouldn't come close to the caliber of full-time soldiers or mercenaries, battles are fought in more places than the front lines. With basic training, they could serve well in the back end. Civilians have been drafted to serve in many wars. If it never leads to war, they only have to worry about protecting the city as planned, so growing this business can't go wrong for Ryoma either way."

"This is Ryoma we're talking about," Serelipta chimed in.

"Hm? It sounds like you saw this coming."

"Well, duh. I *did* see it coming; Ryoma does have the talents the gods of Earth threw at him, after all."

"The ones about violence and crime..."

"Those gods are older and more powerful than us, regardless of their moral compass. They're quite powerful talents, which gives Ryoma a good intuition when it comes to stuff like this, like he's predicting his opponent's next move from his surroundings. His experience dealing with a lot of malicious people in his previous life must have something to do with it, but that could evolve into a Sixth Sense skill or something with the right training. I did say that talents for violence had been planted in him, but what are talents if not a toolbox? It makes life easier if you have them, but it's not a requirement to achieve what you want to achieve. And it all depends on how you use them. Talents don't dictate how humans live their lives."

All the other gods agreed, even Wilieris, prone to butting heads with Serelipta as she was. "Yes... Even an affinity for crime can be used to help and protect others. Perhaps Ryoma's starting to prove that without even realizing it."

"Maybe he chose the best way for him to prepare with a sort of pseudo-sixth sense based on his talent and experience."

"We can't credit all of his friends solely on our blessings either."

"Honestly, Ryoma has zero social skills. Still, he tried for thirty-nine years in his old life to get along as best as he could with other people, and he's kept up that effort in his new life. That's why he has so many friends who are ready to lend him a hand."

"Isn't it pretty much because of the Earth gods' sabotage that he didn't get along with people there? Whenever we go to check on things down on Earth, I get the impression that at least half of Ryoma's ex-coworkers couldn't hold a conversation with someone for more than five minutes without the police being called."

"Right... They can *keep* their toxic little workplace. If I had to put

up with people like that, you probably couldn't stop me from knocking their teeth out."

"B'y's got a helluva lot of patience. Prob'ly a lot more than most people, if 'e can put up with arseholes like that."

"Grimp's right. Of course, he probably wasn't so good at it when he was younger, and he probably carried a lot of bad memories into adulthood. When you've spent a literal lifetime thinking you're good for nothing, of course it's going to be difficult to shake that mentality. I can only hope he starts to clue into his surroundings a little more... Of course, he's only a teenager, while we're literal gods. We have all the time in the world to watch him grow."

The gods shared some warm smiles.

"Well, Serelipta, I hope you enjoyed that little respite, because it ends here."

"What...? I-I'm not sure what you're— Wh-Why can't I move my everything...?"

"The lady doth enjoy the sound of her own voice too much, methinks. Since you seem to be in better spirits now, if you're quite done with your little spiel, we still have the matter of completing your punishment to attend to."

"Wait! You don't have to carry me—"

"Oh, no need to be shy. I'll carry you *alllll* the way there." Kiriluel said, throwing Serelipta over her shoulder again and shuffling off.

"Can't get any peace and quiet around here..." Gain muttered, to the amusement of the other gods, as they returned to watching the world below.

Extra Story: The Gods on Earth

Gain and the other gods had taken up a space of Earth's divine realm to observe its human occupants.

"So, that manager of Ryoma's was another victim of the Earth gods..."

"He would succeed in everything in life with minimal effort until the moment he met Ryoma... So he blamed Ryoma for his newfound difficulties in life."

"The fact that he took his success for granted and slacked off on his academics or other hard work in life, and that he blamed his failures on Ryoma was his own fault, so I don't have sympathy for him there."

"Kufo has a point. His predicament was simply a result of how he treated Ryoma when he was alive. He would have been in a different place if he had stopped to consider his actions before Ryoma passed, like Baba did."

"That's true. He was being led to make Ryoma suffer as well, but he learned his lesson in time, to prevent catastrophic consequences. Otherwise, he would have died in that car accident, or lived the rest of his life a paraplegic."

"Destiny has collected a lot of its debt, it seems..."

"That whole company was built like a cage to keep and torment Ryoma by bending and twisting destiny... It has no reason to exist now that Ryoma has passed."

"There were more people at that company who treated Ryoma unfairly... But the company won't last much longer, and it looks like losing a job for a human in this day and age can be very hard on them. Most of them will break up with their significant other or fall ill as they lose their job to make up for their actions... Some of them really are hopeless, though."

"You sound mad, Lulutia."

"Something bothering you?"

"Well, I *am* the goddess of love, after all. There's this girl in Ryoma's department; she took advantage of men noticing her looks by making them buy her expensive clothes and jewelry, making them pay for excursions... It's not that she equates love with money, she only sees it as a tool to rob others of their money."

"I noticed someone like that too. A boy who has a whopping

roster of fifteen long-distance girlfriends at different cities he's been to business trips on. As the god of life, I could commend his strong drive for preservation, but it's not healthy or fair by any means."

Gain, Kufo, and Lulutia maintained the guise of a nonchalant observation as they silently spoke with each other about another topic entirely.

Have you noticed? Gain asked.

Yep. Looks like we overstayed our welcome, shoddy security or not.

Two of them. No animosity, at least, and not very powerful. Are they just scoping us out?

Can't say. They may be concealing their powers... They have definitely noticed us. An attempt at communication may prove better than fighting or running. Thoughts?

Sounds good to me. We're the ones trespassing, anyway.

I don't want to fight if we don't have to.

Having reached an agreement, the three gods turned to the presence they felt, and called out to them.

"Gods of Earth, we would like to talk to you."

"I know we didn't knock, but we don't want any trouble."

"We're not going to fight. Could you show yourselves?"

Their calls were met with silence.

"What to do... I don't want them to get the wrong idea about us..."

"Should we just leave, or...?"

"Hmm... If they do attack us, we can't just lie down and take it..."

Just as the three took a defensive stance, expecting the worst...

"Wh-Whoa! Hold on! We don't want to fight either! You have the right to remain silent!"

"Stop rambling like an idiot. They said they're not here to fight... And what, are you going to arrest them? It sounds stupider when you're freaking out, ready to bolt."

A couple of gods appeared in the form of a young male and female wearing business suits.

Looks like we can talk to them.

Just as Lulutia expressed this thought, the frazzled goddess of Earth produced a business card from her pocket.



“Nice to meet you. I’m Ishigami Yokota.”

“Oh, thank you...”

“What do we do? Don’t we have to return our own ‘card’?”

“That’s what businesspeople do in Japan, anyway. What can we do?”

“Don’t worry. We don’t always have cards either. Seeing as you’re gods from another world, I’m sure you have different cultures.”

“Thank you for understanding. I am Gain, the creator of Seilfall.”

“God of Life, Kufo.”

“Goddess of Love, Lulutia.”

After those greetings, eyes gathered at the man in the suit.

“What.”

“Excuse you! We’re introducing ourselves!”

“Not to these trespassers, I’m not. Not like we have names to give, anyway. Let’s get this over with and get out of here.”

“Seriously, stop it! We were going to talk this out peacefully!” cried the goddess, looking apologetically to the gods of Seilfall.

“No need to apologize to us.”

“We are trespassing.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you have your own business to attend to.”

“I am really sorry,” said Ishigami. “If I could explain... The only gods of Earth who have names are famous ones remembered in myths or still worshiped today.”

“Like they’re the celebrities, and we’re nobodies. Weaklings like us aren’t known, and we don’t have a name.”

“What about the name you just told us...Ishigami Yokota?”

“I’m sorry. That’s a sort of alias I prepared ceremoniously, kind of. In Japan, there is a belief that a god inhabits every object; I’m a god that lives in the rock next to the field owned by [BEEP] in [BEEP], [BEEP], [BEEP] Prefecture.”

“Right... I noticed your name was written with the characters for ‘farm,’ ‘next to,’ ‘rock,’ and ‘god.’”

“Uh, but what was that weird noise when you were saying—”

“Censoring. Nowadays, privacy and protection of personal information is a serious matter, even in the divine realm. When we say any personal information, we are automatically censored.”

“Sounds like the gods on Earth have things tough as well.”

“Just get to the point,” the suited man said, summoning a black, rectangular box by his side, shattering the pleasant air of small talk.

“What are you doing?! You can’t just whip out that ridiculously insidious thing, like you’re ready to fight! We have the chance to talk it out, so we could have eased into it!”

“Shut up. You’re not the one forced to hold this ridiculously

insidious thing. I don't want it on me for another second more than I have to."

"I understand that, but..." Yokota rubbed her eyes before turning back to the gods. "I'm sorry about that. We really don't hold any animosity towards you."

"I believe you, after our conversation. But what is that...?"

The male god opened the box to answer the question. The pitch-black box contained a pair of swords that the gods knew well.

"That's..."

"The swords Ryoma's dad left for him!"

"Why— How are those here in the divine realm?!"

"I'd be happy to explain. But first, would you care to tell us why you are here in our world? It would surely make this conversation progress more smoothly."

"Hm... Understood." Gain explained why they were trespassing on Earth's divine realm, encouraged by Yokota's humility.

"Thank you. That clears up some things, and we should be able to answer your questions."

"Great to hear. I have many questions, but first, what now?"

"We will not attack or detain you. Do feel free to examine the circumstances surrounding the dearly departed Takebayashi Ryoma all you like. And perhaps get in some sightseeing across the country while you're at it."

"Wait, really?"

"We're from another world, you sure you can trust us?"

"Japan is relatively open to students and tourists from overseas, and the divine realm shares that philosophy. We have no need to let people in with animosity towards us, but as long as you're coming with a sincere interest in research or culture, which seems to be the case here, I see no issue with that. Your actions just now do make you at least somewhat trustworthy."

"Truth be told, our bosses knew about you guys for a while. Apparently they let you be because you weren't doing any harm."

"Really?!"

"They actually helped you out, I think. Wasn't it easy to get info from downstairs?"

"Oh, my..."

"And here I thought the security was lacking... They let us in."

"No, you were all very good at infiltrating. We only discovered you because of the disparity in the development of our worlds, and that you were unaware of the rules in our divine realm. You left behind an access log after your research."

"An access log... Like a file. Isn't that a computer term used by humans?"

“It’s not just a computer thing, but yeah, something like that.”

The gods were a bit despondent to discover that they would have naturally been found out with a record of their actions on the side of the Earth gods, but soon found their next question.

“Could you tell us why these swords are here?”

“A higher god used their power to obtain them. Spirited away, you could say.”

“That leads us to another question. Why are you presenting the swords to us?” Kufo asked.

With a pained expression, Yokota squeezed out, “We want you to take these with you.”

“To our world, you mean?”

“Yes. There are a few reasons for our request. The first, as you can see, is because these are no ordinary swords. Their creator, Takebayashi Musashi made these, quite literally, by pouring his soul into them. A miraculous feat, achieved through his gods-given talent, years of training, and incredible determination. The swords have become cursed, seducing those who behold it, corroding their minds and driving them to madness. Humans in our world have no means to fight their allure. If these swords had remained in the human realm, they would have changed hands from human to human, bringing about death to their holders and those around them.”

“Long story short, we don’t want them. No good will ever come of them, so we want them out of our world.”

Yokota glared at the man. “Was that flippancy of yours really necessary?”

“Shut your pie hole. Pussyfoot around it all you like; it doesn’t change the fact that we’re trying to force our problems onto them.”

“Have you no respect for our work?! Or these gods?!”

“Respect, eh? Regardless of whatever damage they haven’t caused over here, they’re still trespassing. They take this thing, and we’ll be even.”

“Uh, could we interrupt?” said Gain. “We don’t mind a blunt approach. Let us continue.”

“Excuse me!” Yokota said. “As I was saying... The favor we’re asking of you is, in part, a small token of our apology for Takebayashi Ryoma. While these swords could only bring harm to us and our humans, they are a keepsake of his father. And, much to our surprise, Takebayashi Ryoma has never once used these swords despite keeping them until his death. While he must have built some resistance to them in his life, he should be able to now wield them without falling for the madness of the swords. And the swords themselves are exceptional, and should prove useful in combat in your world.”

“I’m sure they will,” Gain admitted. “But why show such

consideration now?"

"Right. Why didn't you give him a hand while he was still alive?"

"From what you're saying, it sounds like you knew how the god of Earth had interfered with his destiny while he was alive."

"That's true," Yokota admitted. "The one you call the 'god of Earth' is the one we call the Old God, the Nameless God, or the Ancient One. It has been told that it existed before the world was born, and possesses immense power. When this world was created, the Old God forsook managing the world. Accordingly, it and the various gods that rule the world now agreed not to interfere with each other in any way. Of course, any action that would affect the fate of the world itself would be another matter, but they leave each other alone for the most part. That's why gods like us have come to speak to you."

"I suppose toying with a human's destiny doesn't breach that agreement?"

"This is an excuse, but humans who worship a particular god are protected. Gods worshiped by humans do exist, and they look over their believers. Interfering with any believer would infringe on the long-standing agreement. However, there are humans that forsake their faith from tragedy, or never believe in any religion or god to begin with. The faithless population seems to be on the rise, especially in recent Japan..."

"Those humans are not covered by the agreement."

"Unfortunately... Those of the Takebayashi clan were impacted more than others, after one of their ancestors struck a deal with the Old God long ago."

"How about these swords? Wouldn't bringing them here breach that contract?"

"Apparently, the Old God loses interest in their projects once they die."

"Just curious... Why would the Old God do such a thing?"

"Back in the day, it only watched the events of the world unfold. Now, it simply repeats toying with a human and watching them die. We don't know if there's any meaning to it at all."

The gods of Seilfall shared a look, confirming their agreement.

"The god of Earth— This 'Old God' is unforgivable, but I understand that there are gods here that are not happy with the current state of things. We'll take these swords. Can we decide when to give them to Ryoma?"

"Of course."

"Then I think we'll be leaving. We have some considerations now."

"We might want to come again if we have any questions, or something. What should we do, then? We can contact the Old God,

but we don't want to do that unless we have to, obviously."

"Please continue to trespass. Some minuscule gods like us will be sent your way."

"Can you be the one to see us again, Miss Yokota?"

"I would love to serve as your correspondent, but jobs are hard to come by in the divine realm of Japan... After all, the people here believe a deity inhabits every object, do they not?"

"Huh? Yeah, all the openings get filled right away, whether it's new recruits or someone the big guys upstairs deem worthy for it getting recruited. I was appointed to carry those swords, and once we're done here, I'm effectively redundant."

"Things have become more efficient as we keep in step with the human world. I've heard that official seals are being phased out. Eventually, all the seal confirmation officers in the divine realm will be made redundant."

"Who gives a shit about them? All they do is check to see if the right seal was used on the right document. Useless job, honestly."

"But it's still good, honest work. The fewer jobs there are, the more competition there ends up being."

"I, for one, *like* not having a job. I don't need that crap in my life. It's not like we need to eat like humans do."

"Even in the divine realm, Earth is pretty wild..." Gain muttered, and Kufo and Lulutia chuckled.

After thanking Yokota, the three gods all returned to Seilfall.

Afterword

Roy here, author of *By the Grace of the Gods*! Thank you so much for picking up Volume 10! What a milestone! Thinking back on the process, it seems like there was so much to do every day, yet time went by so fast at the same time... It's a strange feeling. I do know for sure that *Grace* has only made it this far thanks to all the readers who enjoy it!

There were some major advances in the plot in this milestone volume. With all the friends he's made along the way, some new acquaintances, and the new addition of goblin familiars, Ryoma has gathered a great force to tackle the crime in Gimul. Will he be able to restore peace in the city?

As for the extra story, we finally get to meet the gods of Earth! I wanted to shed a little bit of light on the "God of Earth," and where they stand among the gods of Earth. There are still plenty of mysteries surrounding this god, like its end goal... There's plenty of story left to tell in *Grace*, and as Ryoma spends more time in Seilfall, we should find out more about the Old God.

Having discovered the aim of the gods of Earth, what will the gods of Seilfall and Ryoma do next? I do hope you'll stick around to find out and enjoy more of this slow fantasy world life.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter 7, Episode 5: Self-Reflection and Recruitment

Chapter 7, Episode 6: Skirmish of the Rich

Chapter 7, Episode 7: The Walk Home

Chapter 7, Episode 8: Reinforcements Arrive

Chapter 7, Episode 9: Three-Day Weekend, Day 1

Chapter 7, Episode 10: Three-Day Weekend, Day 2

Chapter 7, Episode 11: Three-Day Weekend, Day 3

Chapter 7, Episode 12: After Playtime, Part 1

Chapter 7, Episode 13: After Playtime, Part 2

Chapter 7, Episode 14: End-of-Shift Meeting

Chapter 7, Episode 15: Improving Relations

Chapter 7, Episode 16: A Pilgrimage of Groundwork

Chapter 7, Episode 17: The Mass Hiring

Chapter 7, Episode 18: Changes in the City and Sher's
Conundrum

Chapter 7, Episode 19: The Trash Processing Plant and Wist's
First Crush

Chapter 7, Episode 20: One Fateful Night

Extra Story: The Gods on Earth

Afterword

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By the Grace of the Gods: Volume 10
by Roy

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